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Supporting the Educational Interests of Adult Patrons through College-bound Programming

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ABSTRACT

Public libraries are information centers for communities, serving the needs of children and their families, seniors, veterans, and small businesses. Content analysis of rural public libraries shows that, based on the placement of information within their website, college planning information and programs are aimed at teens rather than adult learners. Prospective adult learners and other non-traditional students would benefit from programs and services designed to help them navigate the maze of requirements and processes for earning a college credential. This article advocates for the role of public libraries in advancing college literacy among adult patrons.

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KEYWORDS

adult learners; college literacy; higher education; nontraditional students; rural public libraries

Introduction

In every community throughout the United States, there are adults thinking about earning a college credential. Some adults have young children and want to be a good role model for them by earning a degree or credential (Headden 2019). Some are thinking of enrolling in higher education for the first time or are among the 36 million Americans who fit the “some college, no degree” (SCND) category, having attended college years ago (Shapiro et al. 2019). Historically, changes in the economy have led to increases in college enrollment due to job loss. During the Great Recession in 2008, 1.75 million individuals with some college education experienced job loss compared to 5.6 million people with a high school diploma or less (Carnevale, Jayasundera, and Cheah 2012). Thus, some may be driven to college as a means of pursuing an alternative career and new industry. Furthermore, economic changes may require revamping one’s skillset or learning new technologies and processes that require additional coursework or a degree (Genco 2007). Public libraries should be involved with college-related matters because when a corporation evaluates a city for a potential relocation or expansion, among the many factors it considers is the educational attainment of the city’s residents, who are, after all, its potential workforce (Lyon 2011; Roshania 2010). An educated workforce is more attractive to potential businesses as well as more conducive

to economic growth, which leads to a stronger economy for the entire community, and possibly increased use of the library.

The reasons for enrolling in college later in life are as varied as a library's patrons. Whatever the reason, public libraries can help adults pursue their educational goals just as they assist those community members interested in operating small businesses, partnerships that also have the added advantage of supporting a community's economic development (Mehra, Bishop, and Partee 2016). This author began advocating for college literacy programs and services for adults in 2015 and has observed that literature related to this topic continues to lag, focusing instead on services for college-bound teenage patrons (Hands 2015). The research presented here seeks to understand how college literacy is supported by public libraries in rural North Carolina, the state with the eighth-highest number of higher education institutions in the country (Myers and Kambhampati 2019). It aims to increase awareness of how public libraries can meet the information needs of college-bound adult patrons and will offer programming suggestions that may be implemented as a first step to serving this user group and boosting college literacy within communities.

Literature review

The context of North Carolina

North Carolina is known for its elite research institutions such as North Carolina State University, Duke University, and UNC-Chapel Hill. Dubbed “the furniture capital of the world” (Economic Development Partnership of North Carolina [EDPNC], n.d.), North Carolina boasts several global industries including furniture production, biotechnology and pharmacology, information technology, textile manufacturing, and aerospace engineering (North Carolina Department of Commerce [NCDC], n.d.). Moreover, nearly 40 Fortune 500 and Fortune 1000 companies are headquartered here, attracted to the state, in part, because of its educated workforce (EDPNC, n.d.; NCDC, n.d.). North Carolina is home to 58 public two-year and 65 four-year public and private nonprofit institutions (Myers and Kambhampati 2019), yet less than half of all North Carolinians aged 25–44 complete higher education (Spellings et al. 2019).

What may be less widely known about North Carolina is the rural character of the state. The NC Rural Center categorizes 80 of the state's 100 counties as rural i.e., areas with a population density of fewer than 250 people per square mile (NC Rural Center, n.d.). Between 2013 and 2017, the median income in rural counties was 39 USD K in contrast to 50 USD K for the state (Henderson and Chemtob 2019). The number of residents is projected to fall in rural 21 counties over the next 18 years; some of these counties did not begin to recover from the Great Recession until 2015 (Henderson and Chemtob 2019). Over

a quarter of North Carolina counties are in the Appalachian region, an area where for adults aged 25–64, attainment of a bachelor’s degree trails the U.S. average by 7%, although the rate of those with high school diplomas was just 0.1% less than the national average between 2014 and 2018 (Pollard and Jacobsen 2020). Though concerning, the degree attainment rate is not unlike that seen nationwide through the decades. In a study of 1988 national data on college attendance patterns, Byun, Irvin, and Meece (2015) observed a gap between rural and urban high school students in the period of entry into college as well as a gap in the likelihood of continuous college enrollment. These differences were attributed to socioeconomic status and high school preparation. A replication study (Wells et al. 2019) showed a narrower gap in college enrollment and completion between rural and nonrural students. The former still lagged; however, enrollment rates for rural students increased over time. For those who delay college enrollment until well into adulthood, the need likely exists for assistance and information on college planning, indicating a potential audience for a public library’s college literacy programs and services or opportunities for partnership with organizations in the community.

Barriers to college enrollment

Prospective college students in rural and Appalachian regions face similar barriers when it comes to higher education: academic under-preparedness, a dearth of information about college in general and financial aid specifically, a lack of Internet access to complete applications and classes, and few families members who attended college who can serve as advisors or interpreters of complicated college systems (Ardoin 2018; Hale, Malone, and McCann 2017). Access to reliable transportation and distance from commerce and important infrastructure such as social services pose additional challenges (Ardoin 2018; Krupniak 2018). Though not limited to rural populations, prospective students in rural settings also report a lack an understanding of academic jargon, which can lead to feelings of inadequacy when navigating college environments (Ardoin 2018). One might expect the role of bridging the college literacy gap to be filled by school counselors. However, they are often overburdened, as can be seen by the national average counselor-to-student ratio of 430 to 1, compared to the recommended 250 to 1 (NCES 2020).

Cultural attitudes such as a lack of support among older rural residents also present barriers for future college students: they hadn’t gone away to college, so why should their youth (Headden 2019)? Nevertheless, Carr and Kefalas (2009, 51) note that “small towns are especially good at recognizing, nurturing, and launching talented individuals,” though this often has the concomitant effect of rural brain drain when college-educated young professionals choose not to return to their rural homelands.

Considering the barriers to college faced in one's youth, it is understandable that as an adult, one might possess limited college literacy skills, thereby facing a steep learning curve entering higher education as an adult. College and career readiness programs tend to focus on teens, catching students before they graduate or drop out of high school. Regional initiatives like the Appalachian Higher Education Network have been created expressly to increase college attainment and "provide programs, training, and services that help students overcome social, cultural, emotional, and informational barriers to continuing and being successful in their education beyond high school" ("About the Appalachian" para. 3, [n.d.](#)). Of the nine AHE Centers, only one serves nontraditional adult students; the others work with over 200 high schools. National programs like College Promise endeavor to make postsecondary education more affordable and accessible for all students. However, the opportunities as described in College Promise's catalog of local and state programs are skewed toward recent high school graduates. A working adult would be hard pressed to find a suitable option among the many support programs listed. This presents an opportunity for public libraries to broaden the target audiences for their services. Additionally, the availability of college planning programs and intentional promotion of related library materials for patrons of all ages may serve to normalize education beyond high school in rural and other communities.

College literacy library programming

An emphasis on college literacy programming is lacking in library and information science. A recent search of this journal using the keywords "college" and "higher education" retrieved 1 and 0 results, respectively. Title searches using these terms retrieved 0 and 1 result, respectively. A broader title search using the term "education" resulted in just 16 articles, none of which were relevant to the present study. A search of the wider LIS literature revealed a noticeable bias toward college planning articles for a young adult audience rather than adult. Discussions of adult or nontraditional students have been framed as lifelong learning and self-education, missing the adult degree- or certificate-seeking population entirely (Johnson 2011; Sabo 2016; Schull 2013). Even in the area of programming for older adults, which is usually the target audience for lifelong learning programs, Sabo (2016) concluded that "libraries are missing a prime opportunity to expand services" (39). Though the book *Outstanding Books for the College Bound* (Johnson 2011, 3) has a chapter on nontraditional students and lifelong learners, the discussion still does not offer encouragement for pursuing a degree or credential: "whether we have left our college days behind or still dream of donning a cap and gown, we have a lifetime of opportunities to educate ourselves *unbound by college curricula*

and requirements” (emphasis added). While a useful readers’ advisory tool, the resource is not adequate support for the college literacy needs of adult patrons.

Public libraries, of course, offer educational programming. According to the 2014 Digital Inclusion Survey, nearly 92% of public library respondents offered summer reading programs for children – the largest percentage of all options in the Education and Learning category (Bertot et al. 2015). This is over twice as many libraries in rural locales that offered adult summer reading programming (32.3%) and over three times as many providing access to and use of formal online education content and GED preparation courses. Summer reading programming for children was more commonly offered. Moreover, such programming was also more likely to be formalized rather than relying on patrons to initiate contact. This resulted in point-of-use service or programming, as seen with GED prep and access to and use of formal online education content across libraries in all locales (Bertot et al. 2015). The void in the literature and omission from intentional programs and services highlights a misunderstanding within the library community of today’s college student.

Adult learners

Adults seeking college degrees or credentials have historically been referred to as “nontraditional students.” They are also called “post-traditional,” signifying an emerging form of college-going that is “cross-generational and aligned with the innovation economy’s emphasis on lifelong learning” (Soares 2013, 5). These students are sometimes defined by enrollment status (part-time) and age (over the age of twenty-four). The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) characterizes this group as individuals who

- delay enrollment (i.e., do not enter postsecondary education in the same calendar year that they finished high school);
- attend part-time for at least part of the academic year;
- work full-time (35 hours or more per week) while enrolled;
- are considered financially independent for purposes of determining eligibility for financial aid;
- have one or more dependents (usually children, but sometimes others);
- are single parents (either unmarried or married but separated); or
- do not have a high school diploma (i.e., obtained a GED or other high school completion certificate or did not finish high school). (Radford, Cominole, and Skomsvold 2015)

In academic year 2011–2012, 74% of undergraduates had one or more of these characteristics (Radford, Cominole, and Skomsvold 2015).

The above conditions mean this population of students present with a different set of responsibilities than those of typical freshmen; these

responsibilities make the traditional 15-week, in-person, day-class format a mismatch for their life circumstances. Learning how to navigate the byzantine system that is higher education in addition to other more pressing life concerns leaves the nontraditional student needing a comfortable, familiar place to get information. The public library, already known for providing quality services that advance the information and educational needs of the community, is one such place.

Prospective adult students also have specific needs and experiences that warrant individualized attention and space akin to a support group, where they can be with those facing similar circumstances, as adult learners report feeling anxious and apprehensive about returning to school at a nontraditional age (Genco 2007). Such feelings may be exacerbated by attending programs designed for a younger audience even if the subject matter is relevant. Offering programming for small groups of adult learners gives them an opportunity to interact with others grappling with the same kinds of challenges, building a cohort that “gives them a sense of community and belonging that often eludes older students” (Headden 2019, 9). Though it may come as a surprise to find adult-focused college literacy programs and services at the public library, this setting may be comfortable for people in rural communities where patrons and staff are likely to have personal, supportive relationships based on outside community ties.

Recent history shows college enrollment increases during periods of economic downturn. It behooves public libraries to expand the visibility of higher education resources beyond the traditional focus on youth because this enrollment increase comes largely from adults (Barshay 2020). The period of the Great Recession saw an increase of almost 16% in adults returning to college for additional education and credentialing. Unfortunately, in addition to the situational barriers stemming from the life circumstances of adult students, there are also information barriers, one category of which – problems with college processes – could be supported by programs and resources at the public library (Genco 2007). Vargas (2004) noted similar college planning information barriers faced by young people. Thus, if they decide to attend college later in life, they probably do not have foundational knowledge to fall back on even for getting started.

Thankfully, for youth, the information interests and gap are being addressed through regional and national initiatives and library programming. In response to an apparent gap in services to adult patrons, this study examines rural public libraries’ attention to adult learners’ college literacy needs starting with providing relevant information via the library’s website. This study seeks to broaden awareness of how public libraries are meeting the needs of college-bound adult patrons and offers suggestions that may be implemented as a first step to serving this user group to boost college literacy in the community.

Study design

A quantitative and qualitative content analysis was conducted on the websites of a selection of public libraries in North Carolina counties designated as rural by the NC Rural Center. This unobtrusive data collection method suited the study's aim of analyzing website content to get an understanding of how libraries were meeting the community's college literacy needs at a basic level. A directory of libraries was downloaded in Excel format from the website of the state library of North Carolina on May 8, 2020; the directory had last been updated on March 17, 2020. Public and academic libraries were included in the directory. After filtering the directory list to only public libraries, the data was sorted by county, then color-coded to match the color-coded locale designations used by NC Rural Center (i.e., rural, regional city/suburban, and urban). Using lists of colleges and universities in North Carolina obtained from four sources, rural counties with a college, university, or community college within it were noted on the public library directory spreadsheet.

A purposive sample of rural public libraries was selected based on the criteria that the library was located in a county that also had a college, university, or community college. This resulted in a sample of 179 branches across 52 rural counties, including 14 in the Appalachian region. The rationale for these selection criteria was that public libraries in proximity to higher education institutions might actively promote college planning and literacy to prepare residents for the presumable next step in education after high school or opportunities that would enhance workforce development.

With this list comprising the sample, public library websites were reviewed from May to August 2020 for presence and type of relevant college planning content. Relevant data sought on each library website included programs and services related to college admissions, financial aid, entrance exams, lists of colleges and universities, and links to resources such as the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) or local higher education institutions. When available, library event calendars were searched for relevant events occurring in 2019. Given the global pandemic starting in early 2020 that resulted in the closure of all public libraries, 2019 was selected to examine a full year of event data. While the content analysis proceeded systematically with some rules for inclusion and exclusion, a naturalistic Lincoln and Guba approach was taken to allow for any ex post facto rule development (1985) that might arise based on the data. See the appendix for the content analysis codebook.

Results

This research was prompted by a need to increase the knowledge base of adult prospective students (Genco 2007; Headden 2019). Assuming the reported barriers of high school students hold true for adults pursuing

higher education or credentialing later in life, there is a need for specific and reliable information to support their college literacy. The researcher was interested in the sources of college-planning information presented on public library websites beyond access to vendor-based databases. Forty percent of library branches examined listed resources that supported the community's college literacy. Together, higher education institutions comprised the majority of resources listed on public library websites, followed closely by the website for the federal financial aid application (www.FAFSA.gov). The website for the College Foundation of North Carolina (CFNC), a state-sponsored college planning resource, also figured prominently on library websites. The top ten online resources appearing on library websites are noted in [Figure 1](#).

These resources appeared in sections of the library website intended for adults, teens, and a general audience (i.e., not listed under a heading or page labeled for adults or teens); some resources were cross listed and appeared in more than one section of the website. Sixty-one percent of resources appeared in unspecific areas of the website (labeled "General" in [Figure 2](#)); half were in areas of the website intended for teens, including those resources that were cross listed. Just 19% appeared in adult sections of the websites, including those appearing both in adult and teen and in adult and general sections.

College planning programs and events were nearly non-existent at the branches reviewed. Unfortunately, calendars were unavailable for 2019 events at 40% of all branches sampled. Less than 2% ($n = 3$) of the remaining branches offered programs in 2019 for college-bound patrons. These events, two workshops and one social gathering, were intended for

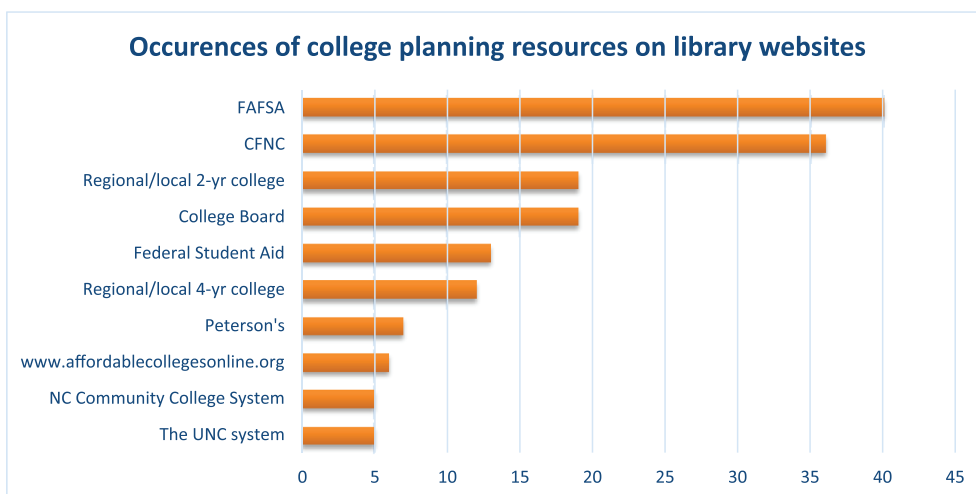


Figure 1.

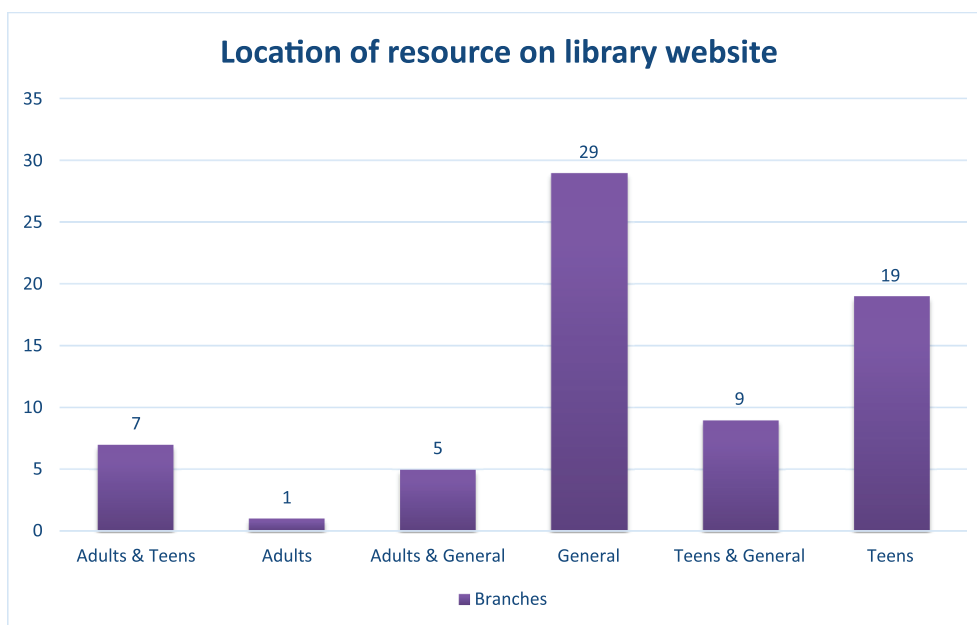


Figure 2.

teens (i.e., appearing in teen sections of the library website). Programming included college and career workshops with representatives from the local two- or four-year college and an event with a Black sorority that included sessions on essay writing and general college preparation for youth in 10th and 11th grades.

All libraries reviewed offered access to NC Live, a library cooperative serving over 200 public, community college, and four-year college libraries throughout the state. Through NC Live member libraries have access to Testing & Education Reference Center (TERC), a resource from Gale that provides access to information on scholarships, college and professional training programs, and practice entrance exams. In 2019, users logged 22,350 sessions in TERC out of 4.8 million sessions among all available NC Live databases; out of 42.9 million items in the database that were examined or downloaded, 1,476 were from TERC.

Discussion

As this research demonstrates, public libraries are primarily attentive to the college literacy needs of teens in the community despite the need for similar information by prospective adult students. This research also revealed an overall need for specific college-bound programming as even at libraries with career-related programming, postsecondary education did not appear to be a major

part of the discussion. For example, though one library's program in 2019 was titled "Prep for Success Career and Education Program (ages 18 and up)," the description makes clear the focus is on careers not college: "Learn powerful job-searching skills and career and educational planning in this series of classes. Classes include: Completing Job Applications, a Resume Workshop, Writing Cover Letters and Reference Sheets, Practicing Interview Skills and Mock Interviews, Professional Attire, Career Planning, and Networking" (Calendar, n.d.). Similarly, in reviewing other public library websites, it was observed that career programming or resources did not include education resources even of a general sort, such as links to local two- and four-year institutions. For adults, especially during times of economic uncertainty, earning a degree, certificate, or credential goes hand in hand with career development (Aslanian 1988; Genco 2007; Hagedorn 2005). It is only reasonable that career programming includes a conversation about higher education.

It could be that because the rural public libraries sampled provided access to college planning information via TERC that staff did not see a need to also include more specific information from direct sources. Nevertheless, finding that 40% of branches examined included links to official resources such as FAFSA, individual local and regional colleges, and North Carolina higher institution systems was a welcome surprise. However, some libraries directed users to defunct websites, indicating a need to regularly review and update resources. Several libraries pointed users to directory-type websites where users can search for colleges and scholarships. While these sites are more well designed than government college search sites, some of the articles on these sites refer users to official websites for more information. Rather than promote aggregate websites that may eventually guide users to more direct sources and with information that may require fact-checking, libraries should initially guide users to reputable direct resources in an effort to more immediately address prospective students' information barriers (Genco 2007).

It can be assumed that among the 34% of library branches with relevant content, the resources listed included community colleges. College and career readiness and workforce development programs like College Promise are affiliated with community colleges. Ardoin (2018) noted the community college mind-set of rural students. With 58 community colleges across North Carolina, most within a 30-min drive (NCDC, n.d.), libraries without these resources may feel that necessary college planning information is already readily available for those interested. Still, Peter and Zambre (2017) found that an information intervention in the form of a 20-min presentation increased college enrollment intentions by 8% two to three months later for students in non-academic families (i.e., first-generation students); intention persisted after one year, suggesting that exposing students to information may impact their decision-making. Similar studies (Ehlert et al. 2017; Herber 2018; Macqueen 2017) showed information interventions contributed to prospective students'

decision to enroll and improvement of students' knowledge base, particularly among those with lower socioeconomic backgrounds. However, there is great variance among the type of information, the mode of presentation, duration, and level of interaction across studies to determine the most effective method of information intervention. Presented here is a modest and more intentional approach to offering such information to adult community members via public library websites that signals the availability of information and its applicability to those considered a non-traditional age group for postsecondary education.

Public libraries already offer customized programming for adult patrons based on audience interests. Adult programming takes the form of book clubs, author talks, coloring groups, craft and sewing nights, computer and internet workshops, and even yoga. Maker spaces support the creative and entrepreneurial interests of adults in the community. These programs align with the mission of public libraries to support the recreational and cultural interests of their patrons. Public libraries are also meeting needs related to the wellbeing of specific community members. Roy et al. (2016) identified over eighty cases across more than forty states of public libraries serving veterans. Programming and services included panel discussions on reentering society, hosted presentations on veteran benefits in collaboration with county veteran services departments, space for homeless veterans to meet with VA staff, and oral history programs documenting their experiences, along with dedicated resources available on library websites. Many of these programs and services were offered in partnership with relevant agencies in the local or regional area.

Implementing new, topic-specific programming is not without its challenges. Staff at public libraries offering health literacy information reported difficulties promoting the library as a resource for health information, reticence among staff to conduct health reference interviews, and concern about being seen as offering advice (Rubenstein 2016). What is suggested here does not require extensive staff training. Programming focused on nontraditional students can be added to the existing lineup of activities for adult patrons, and information related to local colleges and universities can be integrated into current reference service knowledgebases. According to a recent survey of library workers, out of 20 top skills for successfully running public programs at libraries, content knowledge ranked 19 (Barchas-Lichtenstein et al. 2019). Rather, library staff can be informed of basic college planning information relevant to the local community and surrounding areas such as the official website to apply for financial aid (i.e., www.fafsa.ed.gov) and the application cycle, colleges that participate in the Common App application process (i.e., <https://www.commonapp.org>), where to find information on earning credit for prior learning, the enrollment cycles of nearby institutions (obtainable by calling the admissions office), and the office to request transcripts (the Registrar's or Bursar's Office). University admissions staff are happy to send

materials for display on library community boards. Experienced volunteers or interns can be tasked with creating a LibGuide for nontraditional students with frequently asked questions, links to local and regional institutions, local scholarships, and other reliable resources.

To get started with programming, of course, libraries can survey patrons to gauge interest or may dive right in with these ideas. One suggestion is to begin with a program such as “So You’re Thinking About College.” This could be an open forum for like-minded adults to gather and discuss their interests or concrete plans to return to college and could be offered in partnership with a local college or university so that an admissions representative may field questions. Another idea is to host an adult back-to-school night for sharing information about educational opportunities in the community and the resources available at the library, such as test preparation books, materials for brushing up on writing and mathematics, and access to informal learning opportunities offered by the library such as Coursera and Treehouse.

Adult learners have an affinity for institutions with flexible course schedules, distance or online courses, and cohort models, which give students a sense of belonging and community (Lumina Foundation 2018; Hagedorn 2005). Public libraries could support these students by encouraging them to use their library as a student space – an alternative venue to campus or other study spots, one with resources and knowledgeable staff. Recognizing the expertise difference between public and academic library staff, fielding common reference questions, troubleshooting online challenges, and providing general study skills tips and resources are within the purview of public library staff, transferring skills employed with young adult students. Those rural libraries comprising the 32% already providing access and use of formal online education content could serve as guides to other libraries (Bertot et al. 2015).

As noted with programs and services geared toward veterans, programming responsibilities may be shared by partnering with organizations or businesses in the community. Library staff would also learn more about nontraditional students from partners who already interact with this population. Acknowledging the value of connecting with the community, Genco (2007, 7) suggested, “Information could be disseminated to the community about opportunities available to adults considering a return to education. This could be accomplished through newsletters, press releases, flyers, and information workshops at prominent community locations.” Libraries already partner with organizations for children and family programming; the same energy and resourcefulness for securing those partners could be applied to adult college-bound programming. A good starting point is with organizations that are stakeholders in the educational attainment of working adults such as workforce and economic development organizations, Chambers of Commerce, community development corporations, local chapters of professional associations, and the human resources departments of large local or regional companies.

Libraries are already partners with some of these organizations. The Library System of Lancaster County in rural Illinois created business information centers in libraries around the county in collaboration with the county planning commission (Hamilton-Pennell 2008). Josephine Community Library employs a library partnerships manager who also serves as a Chamber of Commerce Ambassador, furthering relationships between the library and broader community (“Library partnership manager” 2019). Local chapters of professional associations, chambers, and local businesses are ideal programming partners, whose resources and programs may interest college-bound patrons. Likewise, such partnerships work as outreach opportunities directed at those who are less frequent users of the library. Schull (2013, 228) included academic learning as one of three approaches to lifelong learning for adults 50 and older and presented the public library as a potential collaborator for local higher education institutions: “For colleges and universities that do not have a community location accessible for older adult learners, collaboration with a local library helps them gain visibility and recruit students.”

In some instances, local government and economic development organizations might organize a campaign encouraging residents to earn a degree. In 2018, the Lumina Foundation awarded grants to six states (California, Hawaii, Idaho, Kentucky, North Carolina, and Ohio) supporting the attainment of degrees, certificates, and credentials among adults. States committed to engaging in activities to help underrepresented populations, adults in rural communities, military veterans, those with no college experience, and those with some college credits but no degree (Lumina Foundation 2018). Several states planned to offer activities that would pair well with public libraries. For example, Hawaii’s plan included the implementation of campaigns to target adults who had earned only a high school diploma. Publicizing such campaigns at public libraries would inform the target audience. North Carolina’s plan included creating a website with financial aid and other information for adult learners. This resource could be linked to public library websites and promoted to adult patrons. If made aware of such initiatives and plans, library administrators or adult services staff could offer their library as a willing partner.

Admittedly, some of the programs suggested here pose challenges for rural public libraries where close to 1/3 of libraries have a median full-time equivalent of 1.9 staff (Real and Rose 2017). Let this be an aspirational list for libraries and a call for collaboration with local and regional partners with shared interest in the community’s educational attainment, which is correlated with positive economic, and even health outcomes (USDA-ERS 2017; Stenberg 2018). Genco (2007, 4) described as an information barrier for adult learners “problems with college processes (financial aid and enrollment services).” While library staff may not be well-versed in each institution’s specific processes, they could be a resource to adult learners by guiding them to reputable online resources and more specific assistance on institutions’ websites, serving

as an internet guide to help distill the information into manageable pieces for overwhelmed prospective students.

Conclusion

The literature tells us that adults pursue educational opportunities when faced with life transitions such as those brought by the 2008 recession, when adults returned to community colleges in great numbers (Aslanian 1988; Genco 2007; Hagedorn 2005). This is likely to occur again as millions face unemployment due to the COVID-19 outbreak; it has been reported that between February and May 2020, unemployment rates grew to double digits for those with some college, a high school diploma, and those who did not complete high school (Kochhar 2020). The aim here is to grow the knowledge base of public library staff on this important and unmet information need. This research, based on information presented on the websites of rural public libraries, illustrates the lack of intentional programming and services to support the college literacy and planning needs of adult patrons. It is high time for public libraries in rural and other regions to consider this specific population as one interested in postsecondary opportunities rather than sticking to “strongly held social norms [that] emphasize that formal education is for the young” (Hagedorn 2005, 22). Doing so has longstanding benefits for the individual and broader community.

As education and information centers, libraries are the perfect partner to offer outreach and programs to millions of prospective students seeking information about degree programs and how to take advantage of opportunities like Lumina Foundation’s Adult Promise. Public libraries are an integral part of a community, be it rural, urban, or suburban. Libraries provide free or low-cost computer and Internet access, story time programs for children and families, author talks, e-books and e-reader tutorials, meeting space for hobby clubs, and makerspaces for the DIY community. As an essential square in the community quilt, public libraries are poised to be a resource for college-bound adult learners of the community as well.

Notes on contributor

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Appendix. Codebook for content analysis

Category	Code	Code definition	Memo
Resources to support college literacy	Present	Database college planning resources, services, programs, or events are present on library website	Website contains information or resources that support college planning
	Not present	No database college planning resources, services, programs, or events are not present on library website	Website does not contain information or resources that support college planning
Section of website/audience	N/A	No website available	
	Adult	Information is presented in section geared to adults	Content appears on page labeled for adults
	Teens	Information is presented in section geared to teens	Content appears on page labeled for teens
	General	Information is presented in section not specific to audience	Content appears on website and is unclassified
Events	N/A	Not applicable	Due to no content
	Yes	Relevant events listed on calendar	Based on 2019 calendar (when available)
	No	Relevant events not listed on calendar	Based on 2019 calendar (when available)
	N/A	Indicates instances of no calendar available, unable to view 2019 calendar, or no website for library	Based on 2019 calendar (when available)
Event audience	Adults	Program or event marketed to adults	Based on 2019 calendar (when available) or location of event on website
	Teens	Program or event marketed to teens	Based on 2019 calendar (when available) or location of event on website