Consistency, Not Cookie-Cutter:
Maintaining Individuality Within a Library System

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BRYSTAN STRONG just celebrated her one year anniversary as Youth Services Coordinator for Jackson County Library Services and is coming up on her fifth year anniversary with the system (having been hired as a shelver in 2015). When she isn't immersed in storytime, tutus, and toddler aerobics, she writes dark speculative fiction (because balance is key). She lives in Southern Oregon with her partner, and their pets: a cat, a bird, and several fish. She loves floral prints, dinosaurs, true crime podcasts, and reading (she is a librarian after all).

Jackson County Library Services (JCLS) is celebrating its centennial this year, and in 2020, we will be transitioning away from a contract with Library Systems and Services, and moving into our own library district. With this transition comes a lot of discussion about where we have come from, and how we want to represent ourselves as a system for the next 100 years.

Jackson County is 2,802 square miles and has 15 libraries to serve its 11 incorporated cities and 34 unincorporated communities. That is a lot of kids and families wanting quality library programming. However, what the kids and families want in our Applegate branch could be very different from what the kids and families an hour south at our Ashland branch would want. It's also important, though, that no matter which of the 15 branches is closest to you, you can walk in there and find not only relevant materials, but also experience a variety of fun, educational, and meaningful programming. This is why I look for "consistency, not cookie-cutter" when coordinating library services at our many branches.

So the question for me, as the district youth services coordinator, was "how do I make sure that all 15 branches are providing the same level of service, that they are all working towards the JCLS mission, but also not take away from their individuality?"

Contrary to what I thought the first step *should* be, in reality, my first step was to be more hands-on. When I stepped into this position, I thought it would be best if I just focused my energy on making sure system-wide programming was consistent in its execution (Summer Reading, 1,000 Books before Kindergarten, etc.) and left everything else to the branch staff. But this plan had a couple of problems:

1. **I was missing many great programs:** Because I didn't have to know about programs ahead of time, I missed some great opportunities to have performers who were visiting one of our branches to be able to visit multiple branches. I was also missing some possibilities to turn single-branch programs or ideas into system-wide programs or ideas. One of my own personal goals is to create more collaboration between branches—to connect our system together a little more. The knowledge that I was missing those opportunities was disappointing to me.

2. **Quality control:** Don't get me wrong, part of the reason I became a children's librarian is that it is fun. I don't want to devalue the importance of fun for the sake of fun–but youth librarianship is "serious fun." It's fun for the sake of learning and experience and growth. Fun still has to fall under the library's mission of connecting everyone to information, ideas, and each other.

The obvious solution to these problems was to create a program request form. That way, staff could write out their program idea, and tell me how it ties into our mission. I could easily approve programs that are completely developed, and schedule a time to chat about the programs that needed a little more thought. I could also keep track of which branches were turning in forms and which weren't. This is not an invitation for a lecture, but rather an opportunity for me to reach out and see what kind of help or support I can offer them when designing youth and family programming. With this form, I can offer feedback, and when I do see an idea that's great, I can work with that person to see how I can turn it into a multi-branch program. It was an obvious and easy solution to these problems. But there was still a third problem.

3. **Creative blocks:** Going into fall, I noticed something; the creative spark wasn't there. If we were approaching a holiday (like Halloween) or given a theme (e.g., space), the staff had so many ideas! Zombie parties, costume contests, slime making, and spooky movies were filling our October calendars, our summer was full of stargazing, space origami, performers, educators, and a plethora of STEM-based learning activities. However, during other months, our youth and family programming fell flat. We were having librarian's block. As a writer, I knew how to tackle this one.

If any of you remember having to write essays in school, it was a lot easier when you were given a prompt when you just couldn't think of something to write. I decided to give the branches a prompt—borrowing the line from next year's Summer Reading Program, but working from the feeling of having celebrated our 100 years as a system and the excitement of being our own district soon, I asked the branches to "Imagine Their Story." I wanted them to think about the kind of branch that *they* want to be. I want them to think about the types of kids and families who visit their branch, what businesses or organizations they can partner with, and what their individual communities need. I also let the branches know that I would be giving a prompt every year. This is to make sure we keep a revolving selection of programming throughout the district. I also added a new line to the program

request form. Following the question "How does this support the JCLS mission of connecting everyone to information, ideas, and each other?" is the question "How does this fit the current theme of "Imagine Your Story?"

Now, this would normally be the part of the article where I would give the results, where I would talk about how many branches turned in forms, how many new programs and partnerships are popping up, etc. I don't have any of that yet. This process is still too new to show any "real" results. However, I am excited about the types of programming proposals I'm seeing. I'm seeing programs that show the love of animals by having teens make toys for shelter animals, I'm seeing celebrations of historical figures who have lived in Southern Oregon, I'm seeing programs that are less about "beating the other team" but focusing more on working *with* your teammates, and most of all I'm seeing a lot of "serious fun."