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Whole Person Librarianship: A Social Work Approach to Patron Services (Book Review)

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Sara K. Zettervall and Mary C. Nienow (2019). ***Whole Person Librarianship***. Available at <https://products.abc-clio.com/abc-cliocorporate/product.aspx?pc=A5497P>

When I landed a job as Community Outreach and Engagement Librarian in the spring of 2019, I was elated. Then confusion set in—what does building relationships and fostering community connection actually look like?

Whole Person Librarianship by Sara K. Zettervall and Mary C. Nienow, published in August 2019, is a guiding light for any librarian asking themselves this same question. Focusing on the intersections between social work and librarianship, it showcases the many ways that libraries can incorporate social work principles into their practice. As libraries continue to evolve into community hubs, the authors argue that drawing on social work principles can help organizations meet foundational library goals.

The book makes a convincing argument for this approach, highlighting the historic similarities between the two professions and reframing the work in library terms. For example, just as librarians have ready-reference textual resources, we can build “a reference collection of relationships” — community contacts at different organizations who can fulfill patron needs that the library cannot (Zettervall & Nienow, Chapter 1, para. 3). In this way, concerns about scope are put to rest; Zettervall and Nienow argue that libraries are just one node on the continuum of care. In practice, this means that librarians can continue to focus on what we do best, while heightening our awareness of and relationships with community organizations that can fulfill other needs. Ultimately, this helps our patrons access the help they need more quickly.

While clearly illustrating the intersections between social work and librarianship, the authors also identify the ways in which social work and librarianship differ and the challenges this can present. Most interestingly, they point out that advocacy on behalf of the vulnerable has long been a professional expectation for social workers; for librarians, external advocacy challenges our conception of ourselves as neutral providers of information.

The book marries theory and practice well, taking the reader from big-picture considerations to tangible examples within the space of a page. For example, when

discussing particular approaches that librarianship can take from social work, Zettervall and Nienow underscore the importance of *reflective practice*—taking the time to process the difficult situations that can arise in this line of work. In addition to thoroughly laying out the philosophical and practical arguments for reflective practice, they provide a worksheet and clear instructions on how to implement it. The appendix includes many other practical resources that help the reader to put this theory into practice right away.

As a field guide on the relationship between social work and librarianship, *Whole Person Librarianship* has a lot of ground to cover. At times, that makes the book feel quite broad. While providing content for everyone, from front-line library and social work staff to library administrators and faculties of social work and librarianship (and more), may make some chapters less relevant to certain readers, the book is concise enough that this does not pose a major challenge.

Though the book is mainly focused on public libraries, the principles and practices outlined are applicable to other library contexts. However, Zettervall and Nienow are honest about the challenges facing librarians in higher education who wish to incorporate social work tenets, citing lack of support from administration and other staff as a common barrier. Aimed at libraries of all budgets, the book offers examples of library systems that have hired full- or part-time social workers, as well as those that have made smaller but still meaningful changes such as starting up ‘Coffee and Conversation’ programs to bring in community organizations. Canadian readers may find the examples of potential partner organizations somewhat U.S.-centric. Despite this, the underlying principles of the book are consistent across geographies and it would be easy enough for a reader to find Canadian equivalents of the specific examples provided.

Libraries are microcosms of their communities, committed to welcoming every person who comes through our doors, with all their wonderfully diverse—and often conflicting—needs. *Whole Person Librarianship* addresses the opportunities and challenges this reality presents and will pay dividends on the time and money invested to read it.

Samantha Elmsley