A HISTORIC ENCOUNTER:
Applying the History Relevance Campaign’s Value Statement to Library Practice

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What is history? And why does it matter?

When asked to define history, many would say “the past.” But, as historians Nikki Mandell and Bobbi Malone write, “[m]ost fundamentally, history is not the past. It is a study of the past” (3). The unknowable past is objective, but history is not objective, fixed truth; “[t]he process of doing history...ensures that history is always constructed” (Mandell and Malone, 6). New sources are discovered, and new interpretations and examinations of existing sources are constantly developing globally. In his collection of lectures, E.H. Carr defines history itself as “a continuous process of interaction between the historian and the facts, an unending dialogue between the present and the past” (26). In short history is “a hard core of interpretation surrounded by pulp of disputable facts” (35). All of recorded history has been “refracted through the mind of the recorder” and further refracted through the lens of the historian (Carr, 24). History is the past interpreted.

As an academic discipline, it has a lot of merits. In their assessment, Mandell and Malone point to the deeper patterns of thinking that history encourages (1). History students are trained to not only be familiar with the facts and events of the past but to analyze the evidence and present their understanding of that evidence by making informed connections between events, figures, time periods, etc. As historians work towards producing original ideas from both primary and secondary sources, they come to find that the evidence uncovered is often conflicting and confusing (1). It is easy, then, for history to be used and abused across many platforms in society (2).

History must be an active way of thinking about the past: asking the tricky questions, drawing conclusions, and supporting those conclusions with the evidence discovered. Historians are likened to detectives in this way. What is learned can be applied in the world to inform, to better the future, and to shield against similar mistakes being made. To do this, creative questioning allows historians to delve more deeply into the nuances of historical events and experiences; the why becomes more important than the what (Mandell and Malone, 3).

Carr believes that if one does not have an appreciation and interest in the past, then it is not possible for them to have any interest in the future because the past and future are one (Carr, 145). And because these two are one and interrelated, history is a moving process (Carr, 146). Therefore, it is fundamental for us as historians to understand the past, present, and future as one continuous flow of events, all a part of one another (Carr, 159).

Sources

The History Relevance Campaign (HRC) has identified 7 ways that history is essential.

• The HRC was informally established in 2012 with a series of conversations about the marginalization of history in the United States. In their own words, “Children are not expected to learn it in schools, community leaders rarely look to it to inform today’s decisions, and national leaders select and distort facts to support their positions.”

• HRC believes that history is relevant to everyone and can play a much greater and more active role in everyone’s lives and communities.

• The History Relevance Campaign Value Statement, outlining the seven ways that history is essential, has been endorsed by numerous historical organizations including the American Alliance of Museums, the American Association for State and Local History, and the National Council on Public History.
Libraries and public history are natural partners.

Libraries can adapt HRC’s Value Statement to advocate for their own histories, advance the profession, and use history as a tool for creating positive change in their communities...
To use this guide...

History is essential to ourselves.

Identity.

- "History nurtures personal identity in an intercultural world. History enables people to discover their own place in the stories of their families, communities, and nation. They learn the stories of the many individuals and groups that have come before them and shaped the world in which they live. There are stories of freedom and equality, injustice and struggle, loss and achievement, and courage and triumph. Through these varied stories, they create systems of personal values that guide their approach to life and relationships with others."

- Libraries: Use history to draw attention to past struggles and triumphs, fostering relationships with their patrons and communities.

- Application: Libraries could facilitate pop-up exhibitions, talk-back boards, or oral history recordings to share their histories with their patrons.

- Example: The current Louisiana State Library is not the first. An effort spearheaded by Charles Gayarré (1818-95), the story of the development of the Louisiana State Library in the nineteenth century is one of both triumph and struggle. Progress on the library was severely hindered by the Civil War and Reconstruction, both of which had far-reaching economic and social effects in the library's community. After years of neglect, the current library opened in 1925 after a collective philanthropic effort from the Louisiana Library Commission and the Carnegie Corporation. This story shares the history of the library, and by incorporating important national events is able to connect the library's experience to that of its community.


HRC essential value

HRC essential value subcategory

HRC essential value subcategory explanation

HRC essential value subcategory applied to libraries

HRC essential value subcategory practical application suggestions for libraries

HRC essential value subcategory practical application example for libraries
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• Source: Phillips, Faye (2008). To ‘build upon the foundation’: Charles Gayarré’s vision for the Louisiana State Library. Libraries & the Cultural Record, 43(2), 56-76

Image courtesy of Library of Congress
History is essential to ourselves.

Critical skills.

“History teaches critical 21st century skills and independent thinking. The practice of history teaches research, judgment of the accuracy and reliability of sources, validation of facts, awareness of multiple perspectives and biases, analysis of conflicting evidence, sequencing to discern causes, synthesis to present a coherent interpretation, clear and persuasive written and oral communication, and other skills that have been identified as critical to a successful and productive life in the 21st century.”

Libraries: From reference requests to collection development, libraries can provide patrons with reputable information and show them how to judge the reliability of sources while helping to develop communication skills.

Application: Organize a Wikipedia Edit-a-Thon, host a Nanowrimo (National Novel Writing Month) writers night, participate in social media initiatives like Twitter’s #DayofFacts.

Example: Wikipedia is a great resource but some articles contain unsupported information, while in other cases important historic minorities or women are unrepresented on the site. To organize your own Wikipedia Edit-a-Thon:

1. Pick a theme (examples include women of color, LGBTQ+, or immigrant histories). If your library doesn’t have a Wikipedia page, you could get participants to create one.
2. Find a space with computers and a strong internet connection.
3. Provide some introductory resources on editing Wikipedia, and have an experienced editor on hand.
4. Make it fun: come up with a hashtag to involve others on social media, take pictures, have motivational snacks or themed music.

Sources:


Image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons
History is essential to our communities.

Vital places to live and work.

• “History lays the groundwork for strong, resilient communities. No place really becomes a community until it is wrapped in human memory: family stories, tribal traditions, civic commemorations. No place is a community until it has awareness of its history. Our connections and commitment to one another are strengthened when we share stories and experiences.”

• Libraries can be spaces for communities to display and share their unique history and experiences.

• Application: Highlight local history resources, create social media caption contests for historic photographs, host local historians as speakers, offer display areas for local art, commemorate special dates and events in local history, collaborate on events with local historical organizations and make it a priority to support each other.

• Example:

Caption this! Taken here @ St Mary's Lib in 1944. Students gather at the circ desk...but what r they looking at? #localhist #twitterstorians

Image courtesy of Library of Congress
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Economic development.

• “History is a catalyst for economic growth. People are drawn to communities that have preserved a strong sense of historical identity and character. Cultural heritage is a demonstrated economic asset and an essential component of any vibrant local economy, providing an infrastructure that attracts talent and enhances business development.”

• Libraries: Many libraries are housed in historic buildings or in historic districts which help to preserve the cultural heritage of their communities and to grow the local economy.

• Application: Make the library part of the cultural heritage landscape by connecting with local historic tourism to make sure the building and its history are highlighted, when renovating keep the historic integrity of the building intact, research the history of the library's building or neighborhood, create a virtual online tour of the historic building.

• Example: Willard Library in Evansville, Indiana
  • For a walking tour: “On May 16, 1877, groundbreaking was held for the library, and the stone foundation was completed on August 13, 1877. Construction on the rest of the building began on September 2, 1877. Terra cotta was used on the exterior in the Victorian Gothic style, including owls as symbols of wisdom. In 1885, the completed library was opened to the public. Notice the empty arches on the building. Construction money ran out before stone carvers could be hired to finish the rosettes on the window arch points. In 1953, a storm damaged the building and significant repair was needed for the tower and roof. Though air conditioning was added in the 1960s, the building remains very much as it was at its dedication in 1877.” Serve participants Willard Punch, or non-alcoholic version, created by the Friends of Willard Library in 1972 to serve at their fundraising events. Highlight any challenges working and serving the public in a historic building poses.

• Sources:
  • Willard Library (1877). *Papers Relating to the Establishment of Willard Library*. Evansville, IN: Willard Library. Retrieved from https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/ls?field1=ocr;q1=willard%20library;a=srchls;fmt=ft
History is essential to our future.

Engaged citizens.

• “History helps people craft better solutions. At the heart of democracy is the practice of individuals coming together to express views and take action. By bringing history into discussions about contemporary issues, we can better understand the origins of and multiple perspectives on the challenges facing our communities and nation. This can clarify misperceptions, reveal complexities, temper volatile viewpoints, open people to new possibilities, and lead to more effective solutions for today’s challenges.”

• Libraries: By offering open spaces for dialogue, creativity, inquiry, and exploration, libraries are at the heart of a democratic society and can use the past to clarify misperceptions, reveal complexities, and open people to new possibilities.

• Application: Offer ESL (English as a Second Language) or citizenship courses and cultural competency programs, open up spaces in the library for groups to meet and discuss contemporary issues, facilitate history book clubs to bridge the gap between the past and present, use workshops and speakers to expose users to the wider world and to foster empathy and understanding.

• Example: In Indianapolis, there are about 13,896 Burmese refugees. 75% of these refugees live on Indianapolis’s south side. Their presence influences local food, politics, religious practice, and social interactions, yet many residents likely know little about the group, their cultural history, the history of refugees in the US, and why many Burmese have been relocated to Indianapolis. A library in the area could use history-based cultural competency programming and solicit volunteers to lead activities for ESL classes and citizenship courses to help integrate the Burmese population with the rest of the community. Libraries across the country like the Chicago Public Library, the Las Vegas-Clark County Library District, and the New York Public Library are already doing.

• Sources:
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Leadership.

• “History inspires local and global leaders. History provides leaders with inspiration and role models for meeting the complex challenges that face our communities, nation, and the world. It may be a parent, grandparent or distant ancestor, a local or national hero, or someone famous or someone little known. Their stories reveal how they met the challenges of their day, which can give new leaders the courage and wisdom to confront the challenges of our time.”

• Libraries: Libraries collect, preserve, and share the human record which can inspire and encourage patrons and leaders alike to meet the challenges of our time.

• Application: Collect diverse books, continue to make accessibility to resources a priority using innovations like bookmobiles when necessary, provide career training resources, display and invest in historical books which are relevant to contemporary issues.

• Example: In 2013, St. Louis, Missouri’s rate of 50 youth gunshot deaths for every 100,000 people was more than three times the national rate of 15 deaths per 100,000. The city’s public library could develop a mentorship book club which pairs successful adults with adolescents to expose them to other paths. Instead of general fiction, the reading list would include biographies by a range of people of different genders, ages, races, and experiences who escaped difficult or violent childhoods. As possible, the library would choose local heroes from throughout history. One example for St. Louis would be Maya Angelou’s I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings. For Middletown, Ohio, Hillbilly Elegy by J.D. Vance. For Hampton, Virginia, Margot Lee Shetterly’s Hidden Figures: The American Dream and the Untold Story of the Black Women Mathematicians Who Helped Win the Space Race. Though historic, the stories would help to address contemporary issues and, while reading and discussing with a mentor, would “give new leaders the courage and wisdom to confront the challenges of our time.”
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**Legacy.**

• “History, saved and preserved, is the foundation for future generations. History is crucial to preserving democracy for the future by explaining our shared past. Through the preservation of authentic, meaningful places, documents, artifacts, images, and stories, we leave a foundation upon which future Americans can build. Without the preservation of our histories, future citizens will have no grounding in what it means to be an American.”

• Libraries: Preserved history creates a foundation for the future by explaining the past and making it accessible.

• Application: Work to digitize important historical records and images, record local oral histories, host genealogy or photograph preservation workshops, make competitions out of transcribing digitized records

• Example: In fall 2014, Jeff Manuel, professor of history at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, partnered with the Edwardsville Public Library to record oral histories for Edwardsville Speaks. Students selected interviewees who could discuss the relationship between the university and the community (town-gown) over the years.

• Sources:

Image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons
Conclusion

As explored, history is much more complex than simply “the past,” and it is much more powerful than that. When librarians adapt the History Relevancy Campaign’s Value Statement, libraries can advocate for their own histories, advance the profession, and use history as a tool for creating positive change in their communities.

History isn’t over. The past is very much alive in the world today. An active way of thinking about the past, history challenges people to ask the tricky questions, draw conclusions, and support those conclusions with the evidence discovered.

Public Historian Hilda Kean recognizes the importance of “recognizing the need to share, participate, and engage not so much as ‘experts’ in ‘history’ but as people with an interest in the relationship between the past and present—willing to explore, acknowledge, and value different ways of configuring this...Exploring our engagement as people with our own and others’ pasts may help us develop different ways of thinking about public history and of sharing ideas and validating—or scrutinizing—experience” (38). In short, history holds the capacity to encourage creativity and critical thinking; to build identity and to bring communities together; to face challenges head-on and to foster empathy for a better future.

Source: