

Seed Libraries Can Be a Promising but Challenging Way to Support Community Engagement and Social Innovation in Public Libraries

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Evidence Summary

Seed Libraries Can Be a Promising but Challenging Way to Support Community Engagement and Social Innovation in Public Libraries

A Review of:

Peekhaus, W. (2018). Seed libraries: Sowing the seeds for community and public library resilience. *Library Quarterly*, 88(3), 271-285. <https://doi.org/10.1086/697706>

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Abstract

Objective – To describe and investigate the establishment, operation, function, purpose, and benefit of seed libraries within public libraries and local communities.

Design – Exploratory study.

Setting – Public seed libraries in Arizona, California, Minnesota, New York, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin.

Subjects – 10 librarians actively involved in creating or maintaining seed libraries.

Methods – 60-75 minute interviews, primarily over the phone, with subjects selected by means of purposive sampling.

Main Results – According to the participants interviewed, starting and operating a seed library requires front-end effort from the “host” library, active participation by a dedicated librarian and community members, as well as ongoing funding, usually on an annual basis (estimated by one participant to be \$2,500/year, mostly for the purchase of seeds). Participant descriptions of their seed library operations differed, but most had a dedicated seed librarian. Participants noted

that primary activities included deciding what seeds to put in the collection, arrangement of the seed collection, development of checkout and return procedures, and ongoing education. Several participants noted that such operational work was seasonal and not steady. None of the libraries included in this study had enough seeds donated to sustain their collections, but rather they relied on purchasing seeds in bulk or asking for donations from seed companies. Cataloging procedures varied in terms of complexity, and participants from one library system reported the use of a seed library cataloging template as being helpful. All participants noted they gave patrons containers to return seeds. While educating patrons in formal sessions is often difficult for reasons such as resource limitations, the interview informants agreed that seed libraries fit into the missions of public libraries by furthering information sharing, access to resources, and knowledge development.

Conclusion – Seed libraries are an active service that assist public libraries in responding to social challenges and in engaging with their local communities as a type of knowledge commons. Seed libraries align with public libraries' shift in priorities from increasing physical collections to enriching lives by providing knowledge and tools to support food autonomy, self-sufficiency, civic engagement, and community education. These libraries are a novel service that engage and attract patrons and support libraries' positions as community hubs.

Commentary

This study adds to the limited research that exists about seed libraries (Dean & Mezick, 2020; Ingalls, 2019). The author's literature review highlighted that the current information on seed libraries is predominantly non-academic and limited to "brief, one-off accounts of various seed library projects" (p. 272). Additional research is needed to understand the larger impacts of seed libraries

on communities and the long-term sustainability of seed libraries.

This exploratory and descriptive qualitative study demonstrated various strengths when evaluated with the Critical Review Form for Qualitative Studies (Letts et al., 2007). Results were presented clearly, and the study provided a detailed and balanced overview of how participants' seed libraries were implemented and managed. The study design was appropriate, and a telephone interview format was successful in achieving the desired results of better understanding how seed libraries were established and operated. The author offered valuable insights for seed library practitioners.

The author indicated that a purposive sampling strategy was used. The process to select the ten key informants was not outlined, other than to indicate that seed library staff were contacted via email or telephone and asked to participate in the study. It was also unclear in the study which, if any, ethics procedures were followed. The author discussed the promise of seed libraries but did not support the argument with data from the study results. Future studies might include an interview guide, quotes from interviewees, or explanations of how interview transcripts were reviewed. Additionally, the author could have provided supplemental details about the study setting and sample to assist in determining transferability to other settings.

As preliminary research on seed libraries, the article is significant to library and information practice. The findings of this research would be useful to an organization interested in starting a seed library, as the study explores different systems and their benefits. The research could also be valuable for librarians currently operating seed libraries who may want to improve on existing processes or practices and can learn from the experiences of the study's participants. Alternatively, librarians may find this study beneficial when seeking information about the implementation of non-traditional collections.

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