

What did you expect to happen?

I chose Rantoul because I had heard that they do an excellent job at community outreach and generally offer a lot in terms of programs and resources for a library of their size and means. I was interested in seeing what sorts of factors were involved in enabling that, and whether their model is unique to Rantoul or might be replicated elsewhere. As I had recently done an Alternative Spring Break stint at another small town local library (Tuscola) and have personal experience as a patron or volunteer with two others (Mattoon and Charleston), I was also interested in getting a comparative sense of the resources, practices, and culture among these different communities and their libraries.

So, I went in expecting the Rantoul staff and community to be relatively dynamic and ambitious, and the library to be a unique community space. I expected to be able to learn quite a bit from them in terms of their practices and orientation towards the community. I did not quite know what to expect in terms of our project, as there happened to be nothing on the library's calendar on the 13th, and the library had been fairly quiet on our introductory visit on the 8th.

What actually happened?

I was not disappointed in my expectations about Rantoul or their staff, culture, and community. They were as advertised as a community-oriented library that creatively does a lot with a little. They run a wide variety of programs, from book clubs to knitting circles to events for local authors and children's story hours. They also provide an interesting array of community spaces and locally-specific special collections which document and bring to life the history of the town. Finally, they collaborate well with other community organizations, and in this way find and meet needs in the wider community and build coalitions that strengthen their own position as well as the entire public sector in Rantoul.

This orientation also translated into tangible success for our project. The strong bond between the community and the library was obvious in the eagerness of patrons to talk to us, and they spoke in glowing terms about the importance of the library to their lives and their community. This was also evident in that multiple people were willing to make a special trip to the library just to talk to us when contacted by library staff. Despite the lack of scheduled events on the day of our visit, we had no difficulty finding enough subjects to build a rich and varied narrative of the library and the community.

What did you learn?

I learned that having a community that wholeheartedly backs your library can make a huge difference. This came through most clearly in our interview with a board member, who detailed how active the board and other community leaders are in the library on a day-to-day basis, and how this contributed to getting the current library built and funded and helps sustain it to this day.

Another thing I learned by comparison to my Tuscola experience (and even in comparison to a library in a larger city like Urbana Free Library) was the importance of the library as a physical space. Space seems to matter just as much as funding or human capital as a constraint on what a library can undertake. Rantoul's surplus of space gives them far more leeway to try new things, as the tradeoffs or costs of

experimentation for them are much lower than at Tuscola or Urbana, where any change in the use of space involves tough tradeoffs and choices.

I'm not sure what my final conclusion is on the question of whether Rantoul's model can be replicated elsewhere. As a future library director, I would definitely keep in mind the way their board works and how tightly integrated and involved it is in daily operations, as well as the way they do outreach and build coalitions, and how well they make use of their physical space. However, there are unique things about Rantoul for a town of its size (the varied and diverse population brought in by the former Air Force base, the close proximity to a major research university, and the wealth of physical spaces as well as the socioeconomic needs opened up by the closure of the base) that might put them in a unique position to do what they do as compared to some of the other libraries and communities I have visited. This is a case that's partly a result of good management and practices, and partly of a unique community, and it's difficult in the course of two visits and a few hours to be very sure of where the balance rests when it comes to that.

How does it relate to the rest of 502?

Rantoul is an excellent case study in the importance of sustained engagement with the community for a public library to be sustainable, to thrive, and to best meet the needs of its patrons and other stakeholders. In this way it clearly illustrates that libraries, information, and society are inseparable topics, as each element needs to work in concert with the others for any of them to be truly relevant and of lasting value.