Your Library, Your Voice:

Community Needs Assessment Findings

for Scott County Library Open+

By Alee Schmierer, Krista Hoitomt,
Molly Bostrom, and Ren Kenning

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Introduction

As technology grows, self-service has become commonplace within various areas of our lives. One key example is self-service store checkouts, which allow customers to scan and purchase their own products without the assistance of a cashier. Librarians have begun to investigate how a self-service model could be applied to library services, allowing for new opportunities to meet the needs of the communities they serve. Scandinavian libraries have pioneered the Open Library model, which is defined as a library system in which a portion of the operating hours are staffed, and a portion of the hours are open to patrons to use self-service systems in order to access library materials (Kelly, 2016). The model has recently been expanding to other library systems throughout the world and has been gaining traction in the United States.

Scott County Library’s vendor, Biblioteca, offers Open+, which is a system designed to set up libraries to operate with a self-service model for a portion of a library’s open hours, a complement to the already established staffed library hours. The intention is that this will allow library users with more flexible hours, creating increased access. Bibliotheca’s Open+ has been adopted in several library systems in the United States, including fellow MELSA library system, Hennepin County Library.

There are two key factors that have led Scott County Libraries to begin considering the open library format within their system: increasing circulation of materials, which is a consistent goal for any library system, and identifying a way to respond to the public demand for more consistent hours. Kristy Rieger, the Library Technology Manager of Scott County Libraries, stated, “we’ve recognized that our hours, because they’re not consistent, are hard to predict, and they’re causing a barrier between us and customers… One of the different things that we’re thinking about is who are these people… Who are we missing because of this problem?” (Rieger,
The hours that Scott County Library currently has do not work for all community members. Rieger said that Scott County was not able to add additional staffing in order to establish more staffed hours, so an open library system is an appealing alternative.

Community Needs Assessment

But, is Open+ the right fit to meet this need? As the Community Needs Assessment Team, we have been considering what an open library model would mean for the Scott County community. As we began, we knew we would need community input in order to understand what this system should look like at Scott County, if it is the best fit for the community and the library system, and if so, what are the key pieces to be thinking about moving forward. Each adoption of Open+ has functioned a bit differently based on the needs of the library system and its community. How should Scott County approach the model? What is most important for their community? We needed to better understand what people are looking for from their libraries and what they are missing. With the input of Rieger and other Scott County leaders, a community needs assessment survey was developed.

The survey questions centered around three themes that were essential to learn more about. First, open libraries is a concept that has been gaining quite a bit of traction within other parts of the world, but we wanted to gain a sense regarding whether or not Scott County residents had ever even heard of the concept. How comfortable did they feel with the proposal? What questions, comments, and concerns did they have regarding Open+? We hoped that what we learned from the survey would help Scott County determine the direction their community facing communication would need to take if Open+ were to move forward. What pieces would require further clarification, and what questions would Scott County need to dive deeper into?

The second theme focused on library hours. More consistent open library hours is the key reason Scott County is investigating Open+, so we wanted to ask the community what hours they
would like to see the library open. Are people looking for earlier morning hours? Are later evening and night hours in demand? How many hours should an Open+ library be open per day? Scott County Library has identified their Jordan and Belle Plaine branches as potential Open+ locations, so we felt it was important to learn what sort of hours residents close to these branches are looking for. Would community members who normally visit other branches be interested in traveling to an Open+ location to make use of extended hours? What extended hours would be most beneficial to community members who currently do not visit Scott County due to the barrier that inconsistent hours creates?

And finally, if Scott County Libraries were to have extended, unstaffed hours, what services and materials are most important for residents to have access to? Are residents mainly looking to pick up holds, browse the collection, and check out materials? Is there demand for extended computer and technology use? Would residents like to see more available meeting rooms? Are there other useful services that have not been considered? This was an important piece of learning. If residents are mainly looking for one service, such as the ability to pick up holds and browse the collection, the library may not want to add too many additional services and full access to the unstaffed library. Adding too much without community interest could result in feelings of being overwhelmed or intimidated by the Open+ model or Open+ features that see a lack of use. It was important to ask the community what they felt most interested and comfortable using in this space.

We identified these themes and developed our survey questions by examining learnings from our initial online meeting with Kristy Rieger and Sarah Tschida with the University of Minnesota’s Resilient Communities Project, our onsite meeting at the Jordan Public Library, and Matt Gunther’s report on findings from early implementers of Open+. We also borrowed questions from the 2016 MELSA Technology Use and Access Resident Survey (MELSA, 2016).
This survey was completed several years ago and surveyed residents with all metro public library systems, so we wanted to capture data that was both updated and more specific to Scott County’s users. See Appendix A for the full survey.

The survey went live on April 29th, 2019, and was open to responses from Scott County residents until May 10th, 2019. The survey was shared to residents via Scott County Library’s website, Facebook, twitter, and Integrated Library System (ILS), as well as Scott County NextDoor. We received 1,784 resident responses.

**Results and Analysis**

Of our just shy of 1800 responses (the data is viewable at [http://bit.ly/openlibraryinquirydata](http://bit.ly/openlibraryinquirydata)), 85% had never heard of an Open Library, let alone used one (see Figure 1). Especially considering that the people taking this survey are likely more involved with public libraries than a representative sample, with 98% of respondents already having a library card, this indicates that communicating what exactly Open Libraries are and how they would be implemented in Scott County would be key to any implementation plan. Additionally, while almost half of respondents said they faced no barriers in accessing the library, a third found it difficult to get to the library during the current hours which reflects a general call for expanded and regular hours seen throughout the survey responses (see Figure 2).
Figure 1. Have you heard of or used a self-service Open Library before?

Figure 2. What do you consider to be barriers to you accessing the library?

As illustrated in Figure 3, respondents are generally more interested than not in the idea of an Open Library in Scott County, while Jordan residents are more enthusiastic than the rest of the survey sample, suggesting it is well situated as the Open Library pilot. This interest is especially important as our survey also showed that people are generally not willing to travel to branches they don’t normally use to make use of Open Library hours (see Figure 4).
Figure 3. How interested are you in using a self-service Open Library?

![Bar chart showing interest levels](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of interest</th>
<th>Jordan (55352) count</th>
<th>Jordan (55352) %</th>
<th>Total Sample count</th>
<th>Total Sample %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Extremely willing</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very willing</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>218</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat willing</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>606</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not very willing</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>590</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not at all willing</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>270</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4. How willing would you be to travel to a Scott County Library that you don't typically visit to make use of Open Library features?

Respondents were, however, less enthusiastic about being comfortable with an unstaffed library in practice than enthused about the idea in theory (see Figure 5). This suggests that getting more feedback from the community about what precisely makes them uncomfortable about the idea of Open Libraries would be essential for any Open Libraries implementation but also how those concerns will be addressed. Again, Jordan respondents proved slightly more...
comfortable than the survey group as a whole, though the difference was less pronounced than when comparing interest levels.

![Bar chart showing comfort level of using the library when staff is not present.](image)

**Figure 5.** How comfortable would you be using the library when staff is not present?

We found that two of the most popular choices for how respondents would use an Open Library model to be self-service checkout, with 60% extremely interested, and browsing the physical collection, with 48% extremely interested. Least popular were using meeting rooms and study space, each with around 40% not at all interested. This, however, runs counter to what the free responses indicated, suggesting that while a minority of respondents wanted to use meeting rooms after traditional hours, it was an extremely vocal minority. Surprisingly the desire for internet access and wifi was very polarized, with about 30% of respondents extremely interested, 30% not at all interested, and the rest approximately evenly distributed between the two (see Figure 6).
Some of the most valuable information gathered was the desired hours of access to a library. We found Jordan resident’s desired hours of access were consistent with those of the survey sample as a whole. Additionally, the desired hours of access for both the entire sample and Jordan residence were largely consistent across all weekdays. Comparing Figure 7 with the Jordan Library’s current weekday hours (10:00am-5:00pm Tuesdays and Thursdays; 1:00-8:00pm Mondays and Wednesday; no open hours Fridays) it is clear that many of the hours most people want to access the library, specifically 5:00-8:00pm, aren’t covered at all 3 out of 5 weekdays. There is also substantial demand for access 8:00-10:00am, hours the library is never open during on weekdays. Looking at Saturday’s desired access hours in Figure 8 (Sunday’s results showed slightly less demand and for a little later in the day, but the shape of the curve was largely the same), the library is currently open during the most in demand hours but there is a substantial percentage of people who would like both earlier and later in the day.
Figure 7. When would you like to be able to access the library? (Results for Tuesday)

Figure 8. When would you like to be able to access the library? (Results for Sunday)

Finally, it is worth noting this paper contains only a small sample of the analysis done by our group, which itself was only a fraction of the potential analysis that could be done with this data. There were a number of questions and areas of inquiry brought up in the Introduction that we simply didn’t have time to address. One could look at different cities, specific ages or
employment within a city, who wants what kind of services, as well as many other areas of inquiry and the overlaps between them. We’d recommend, should Scott County continue to consider Open Libraries, digging deeper into this data both to look for answers for current questions and to direct future, additional questioning.

Free response analysis

As there were so many participants in this survey, we wanted to pay special attention to the free response questions to see how people are truly feeling about the possibility of Open+ coming to Scott County. To do this, we pulled all of the open answers and combed through them to identify key themes. All of the responses and themes can be viewed in a Google Sheet at http://bit.ly/openlibraryfreeresponses. A few representative quotes are included throughout this section to illustrate the main points made in the survey responses.

What do you consider to be barriers to you accessing the library?

We started by asking what people consider to be barriers to them using Scott County Libraries. We had some predetermined options for people to choose from and also left a spot open for “other” to capture additional barriers we may have missed. The biggest theme here was comments about the current open hours. This constituted 50 comments on top of the option to select the provided option of selecting, “It is difficult for me to get to the library during open hours”. Many people were not satisfied with the current availability because the hours conflict with their work schedules or begin much later in the day than they would have liked to visit. Also, with the hours being different from day to day and branch to branch, there is a sense of confusion as to when the libraries are open. Some of the answers asked for more clarity regarding these hours, as well as more consistency.
• Hours (50 comments)
  o Overall difficulty
    ■ “I work 7 days per week, so it is difficult for me to get to the library when they're open.”
    ■ “Some days I’d like to enter in the morning but hours don’t begin until 1 p.m.”
  o Confusion about when the libraries are open now
    ■ “The library has different hours depending on the day”
    ■ “The New Prague Library is closed on Fridays. I find that frustrating because I often plan to stop at the library then realize it is Friday.”
    ■ “With the hours varying by day, I can forget when I should go. Many Thursdays I have pulled into the lot only to remember that they are closed.”
  o Do not see hours as a barrier but would appreciate the convenience
    ■ “Nothing takes the place of the amazing staff & programs the library provides, but more access for picking up books on hold would be great!”
• Resources/Materials (24 comments)
  o Limited collection
    ■ “I find the collection limited. I would rather see Scott County invest in books and people rather than technology.”
  o Others going to Dakota or Hennepin County for access to more materials
• Technology (5 comments)
  o Difficulty with ebooks and other online resources
• Location (16 comments)
  o Work commute closer to Dakota County
  o Responders that recently moved away
• Fines (4 comments)
• Other (24 comments)
  o Parking, busy, lending times/renewals
• No barriers (7 comments)

What Scott County Library materials and services are important for you to have access to when you visit?

Figure 9. Word cloud of important materials and services
To better understand this particular question, we created a word cloud (figure 9) to help visualize what people feel is the most vital part of their visit to a library. Here again we had some predetermined options for people to choose from, such as getting assistance from staff, using computers, browsing materials, and picking up holds. The free responses highlighted some other areas that are important to a vocal minority of respondents:

- Printing/copying/scanning (18 comments)
- Kids play area (9 comments)
- Collection/resources (17 comments)
  - Periodicals, audiobooks, ebooks, reference material
- Internet (6 comments)
  - “WiFi access using my own personal laptop computer”
- Spaces (19 comments)
  - Study spaces, meeting rooms, quiet place
- Other (10 comments)
  - “Very important to vitality of community”
- N/A (2 comments)

Are there any other services or benefits you would like to see in a self-service Open Library?

After asking some questions specifically about the benefits of Open+, we asked folks if there are any other services or benefits they would like to see included in this model. While most of the comments were related to things that are already being explored as part of this concept, there were a few new ideas proposed by respondents. This is also where we first encountered the concern for security.

- Already being considered (30 comments)
  - More comments about picking up holds, printing, restrooms, browsing, and study space
- New Open+ suggestions (9 comments)
  - “Book requests from other libraries in for example an Amazon locker type structure.”
  - “have a place available for leaving a note for staff to get back to me about any problems I experience”
  - “If there aren’t staff around to help out and direct you to where books are maybe a small map or directory would be nice (ex. The directories at the Mall of America that points you in a general direction, but in this case to the genres of books etc)”
  - “Notification on when the self-service system is unavailable e.g. for maintenance”
  - “Virtual librarian”
What questions or concerns do you have about using a self-service Open Library?

In our next question we asked people to share any questions or concerns they may have about using Open+. As many of the answers we received addressed multiple concerns, we opted to sort them by the primary question raised in each comment. As seen in a few of our other questions, safety is the largest overarching concern about implementing an Open+ model. With Scott County’s mission being, “To advance safe, healthy, and livable communities through citizen-focused services,” it is not surprising that the potential security issues around a fully
Open+ system are at the top of people’s minds. Generally, people are worried about what will happen if anyone has unlimited access to the space and there is no staff to monitor activity.

- **Safety and security (488 comments)**
  - “I don’t like the idea of being alone in the library (safety). Or thinking I am alone in the library and finding out someone else is actually there. I’d be nervous and just want to go in and pick-up my materials. I worry that people would hang out in there for extended periods of time, which may make me more uncomfortable using the library.”
  - “I would like an on call staffs to monitor library 24/7 or at least they have someone inside incase of emergency”
  - “I would say I wouldn't really fear my safety as I would assume there would be lots of cameras everywhere. I just hope that if the idea of the open library gets accepted, that people are respectful.”
  - “Just security. Would like plenty of video cameras so I cannot be accused of theft or damage to property. Additionally, security cameras would make me feel safe from "others" that might be visiting the library at the same time.”
  - “My biggest concern would be safety. To compare to the concept of a 24-hour gym, a gym feels safe because you have to pay to enter. Libraries are free, so anyone being able to enter at any time without any staff there feels a bit unsafe.”
  - “Safety and appropriate use. Would like to see cameras in place and “emergency help” buttons in various places throughout the library. PL library is right by police station so that is somewhat comforting. Concern would be teens taking advantage of unsupervised space and doing things they shouldn’t be doing.”
  - “Who would have access, how would you address safety and theft issues, what are you responsible for when you access the library during off hours”

- **Theft and vandalism (89 comments)**
  - “I would not be interested in an open library and don’t believe it’s a good idea as the library and the facilities they are located in could be abused, damaged, items stolen, etc. Unless ther is an iron clad way of knowing who is responsible for bad behavior, I would rather not risk the costs associated with the possible damage.”
  - “How is it controlled that all books being taken from the building have actually been checked out properly?”
  - “My biggest concern would be vandalism. There are too many people in the world today that have no respect for others property.”
  - “Worried that people might take advantage of it - not actually check things out and just take them or trash the space. Hopefully people are better than that!!!”

- **Other misuse (28 comments)**
  - “Maybe it’s my line of work- but I think some VERY inappropriate things would happen inside a library that is not staffed! Drug use, sex, meeting places. I think this is an Awful idea and it would make me uncomfortable to use a library in a way. Please don’t do this!”
  - “Will people act accordingly, keep it clean, pick up after themselves, not steal, not take advantage, etc?”
  - “would be skeptical about some abusing the system and putting others at risk”

- **Homelessness (12 comments)**
  - “How do you plan to keep the library from becoming a shelter for the homeless ?”
○ “Is there a vetting process to obtain a library card? I would be most concerned about security and the library being used as a temporary home for someone who does not have anywhere to go.”

● Cost (10 comments)
  ○ “I’m concerned this would result in higher property taxes.”
  ○ “Would cost of security and monitoring and other upgrades to physical space be offset by reduced staffing overall?”

● Librarians and staffing (51 comments)
  ○ “I appreciate the staff at our library and like the personalized service they offer, so I would be concerned about the library becoming simply a means to an end with checking out materials being a errand, not a fun stop.”
  ○ “Sometimes you just need a person to help with problems or questions”
  ○ “We are slowly cutting out people for technology. We need the social aspect of the library.”
  ○ “What system would be in place for having a staff person contact you if you run into issues during unstaffed hours?”

● Other concerns (32 comments)
  ○ “My library card is sometimes expired when I get back to the library, and I always have a fine of a few dollars. How would this work for me?”
  ○ “Rather than making it a permanent solution, I’d like to see this tested out particularly in the summer.”

● Generally in favor of Open+ (7 comments)
  ○ “Do you need beta testers or users? I'm a vetted volunteer for the Savage Library (ask Stacy Lenarz) and would love to volunteer for this project.”
  ○ “Lets make it happen”
  ○ “Love the idea”
  ○ “When can it start?”
  ○ “None...I am currently using the one at Eden Prarie while their library is undergoing renovation.”

● Generally against Open+ (8 comments)
  ○ “Dumbest idea in awhile from the county”
  ○ “It's just a bad idea. It will diminish community.”
  ○ “Just seems like one more way to make life impersonal.”

*Are there any additional comments you would like to share about your local public library?*

Throughout the survey responses, we received a great number of comments generally in favor of introducing Open+ in Scott County. Some people mentioned their excitement about this possibility since their library’s hours were previously reduced, that it would be a great solution for people who do not have internet access at home, or that it would be a nice option for having a quiet place to visit or study at night. On the other side, there was also a fair number of people who are strongly against Open+ coming to Scott County or think the current system is just fine
as it is. This particular question received even more of these comments on both sides, in addition to revealing an overall appreciation for Scott County Library and bringing attention to other things that card holders would like to see implemented outside the scope of this project.

- Generally in favor of Open+ (58 comments)
  - “I personally would only maybe utilize an open library for the occasional after hours book checkout. But I know there are often people looking for a quiet place to study when the library is currently closed and it would also be a great idea for those without in home internet access.”
  - “I think this is a great idea but will need very specific parameters. Maybe have volunteers sign up to just be a physical presence? That is something I would be interested in doing.”
  - “I would love this!! Why hasn’t this happened already!!”
  - “Thank you for working to adapt to current culture! (Even if I don't necessarily see the need for the Open Library. Maybe with limited hours, like right before it would normally open (8-10 a.m.) or Wednesday mornings or Fridays or Sunday mornings.”
  - “this sounds like a good idea because I was very unhappy when the county cut my library's hours many years ago.”
- Generally against Open+ (55 comments)
  - “Don’t try to fix what isn’t broke. Technology isn’t always something to accept.”
  - “I have seen the librarian take on very unusual and almost dangerous behavior from the public. I wonder what would happen if someone other than the customers wan't there ‘to hold the peace’”.
  - "We have an excellent library we don’t need open concept”
- Natural (27 comments)
  - “For me the services right now are very adequate.”
- Criticism of current hours (40 comments)
  - “Have universal hours for all branches. Like 10-8 M-Thurs, 10-5 Friday, and 10-3 on Saturdays. Closed Sundays, etc. “
  - “Hours seem erratic throughout different libraries
  - “I love the library, but it needs to be open more”
  - “We value it so much and greatly appreciate the resources available. It would be wonderful to have increased access during times that are more convenient for our family and myself as a business owner. “
  - “Wo love our library but feel it is always closed when we need it. It is frustrating.”
- Compliments (180 comments)
  - “I love the Scott County Libraries”
  - “LOVE it. Glad to see my tax dollars spent on a library.”
  - “My family LOVES the Scott County Library and we can't thank you enough for all you do! “
  - Shout outs to Beth and Brittany
- Other feedback (62 comments)
  - Not related to this project - drive up book drop off, digital access, etc
Recommendations

With all of this in mind, we do have a few recommendations for Scott County to consider as you move forward in evaluating the potential for Open+:

1. Prioritize adding consistent, accessible hours. Many survey respondents are worried that Open+ would have a negative impact on current operations, rather than be used as a way to expand current offerings. There is also a general desire for more standardized, consistent hours. Overall, 8:00am-8:00pm appears to be the key times respondents are wanting to be able to access their local library.

2. Focus on safety and vandalism concerns. There were quite a few comments from people asking for 24/7 reservable meeting rooms, which shows that people do not already know that this is an option at some locations. Should you choose to move forward with Open+, this could be a great example to point to to prove that safety and vandalism has not been an issue. At least one comment has said that they have used Open+ at the Eden Prairie Library while they are under construction. Examples like this and Ridgedale Library’s hold room could also be a nice way to further illustrate the safety of Open+ in neighboring communities.

3. Pay attention to printing and technology. People were very excited about the possibility of printing things at the library but are worried about troubleshooting if something isn’t working and staff is not on site.

4. Consider age requirements. There were some comments from people who were excited about the possibility for their teens to have places to do homework at night. However, there were even more concerns about how kids and teens would be supervised and worries about children being vulnerable to suspicious adults in an unstaffed library.
5. **Draft clear communication and share it publicly.** In addition to concerns about how this would impact staff, there were a few strongly worded comments from people who are afraid that Open+ will raise their property taxes. Patrons also have a lot of questions about who would have access to an Open Library and how they would have access.

6. **Explore other options for greater access.** If you find it is not possible or efficient to make the entire library open without staff, a more limited version might work to meet the community’s needs. People are mostly excited and vocal about the ability to pick up holds, print, and use individually checked out study or meeting rooms. People are also wanting more options for book returns and paying fines. The comments show that some people say they are racking up fines because there is not a way to return books when branches aren’t open or that there is not a drive up return. People also want to be able to pay fines by credit card without visiting a branch during open hours.

7. **Lastly, please keep digging into this data!** People are generally excited about this idea. There is so much to explore, including many comments about things outside the scope of this project that could help to elevate the great services that Scott County Library is already offering to its public.

### Alternative Methods of Assessing Community Needs

This survey reached 1,784 respondents through the Scott County Library social media accounts and ILS. Through these platforms, the data we collected shows that 98.1% of our respondents have library cards. The 2016 MELSA survey of Scott County found that 76.8% of people surveyed had a library card. This shows our sample is highly engaged with the library, as is to be expected when using library social media and the email addresses of people who already use the library. If the goal of this project is to assess the needs of active library users, the project
has achieved its goal, but what about Scott County residents that do not follow the libraries on Twitter and Facebook, and others who do not have a library card? This survey has not successfully assessed their needs. To be able to connect with these residents, methods other than this particular survey method must be used.

Past librarians have undertaken huge assessments to find out about their community’s needs. According to “Towards a Progressive Discourse on Community Needs Assessment”, a particularly enterprising librarian went to great lengths to assess her community’s needs:

In 1922 Indiana’s Evansville Public Library commissioned a neighborhood survey that sent a citizen’s advisory committee out on several hundred home visits. Historians have described the Evansville survey “exceptional for its time” because it relied neither on impressionist observations nor on indirect sources like circulation records. Librarian Ethel McCullough wanted to know what the people of Evansville were interested in reading, so she went out and asked them. (LaFlamme, 2007)

While an undertaking like this is probably unrealistic due to budget, time, and the number of households that exist in Scott County, there is something to be said about taking the conversation out of the library. If the library’s goal is to expand access to more residents, these residents should be asked about their information needs, especially the barriers to them using the library. To assess the true needs of the community in relation to Open Access, librarians should conduct surveys in communal places like grocery stores, parks, or a county fair, to gather a more diverse sample size with the goal of surveying people who may not be affiliated with the library already.

To survey a broader scope of the community, methods other than this particular survey will be needed. Other optional methods to do this can be roughly grouped into surveys, interviews, and collected evidence. Surveys could be sent to people in Scott County, potentially with the same questions used here, as an e-survey or through the mail. To achieve this, surveys
should be sent through a more neutral source that is common to more community members, like through the newspaper, with local utility bills, or mailed to addresses in a targeted area (say within 2 miles of a library). Information can also be collected by compiling comments on Scott County’s social media posts about Open Libraries and local news articles about the project (Farrell & Mastel, 2016). For people who are already visiting the library, whiteboards could be used to collect users’ opinions or users could be asked to write their answers to “Minute questions”, as short paragraphs, containing their review of the Open Library concept (Farrell & Mastel, 2016, and Jones, 2017). Interviews could be quick and one-on-one, in focus groups, or taken from overall observations within the library. Focus groups could be an especially important tactic to gather information about community members’ relationships with the library.

Building off the idea of in person interviews, the previously cited “Towards a Progressive Discourse on Community Needs Assessment” recommends using ethnographic research methods to ask broad and qualitative questions better suited to assessing the needs of a community. Collaborating with ethnographers, librarians, and community members could democratize the needs assessment project and affirm the local knowledge located within the community (LaFlamme, 2007). Ethnographies can answer broad and qualitative questions about the residents’ information needs. This can be done through focus groups, in person interviews, or household diaries about information needs, all to help develop relevant public policies and programs. A collaborative ethnography can provide framework for the community needs assessment based on authentic partnerships with local people with local knowledge about what the community really wants and needs (LaFlamme, 2007).

As another qualitative method to assess the local knowledge about community needs, Scott County could tell the story of the community’s relationship with the library by producing an oral history to support the Open Library concept. “Practicing Oral History to Improve Public
Policies and Programs” defines oral history for public policy as similar to a traditional oral history but going two steps further (Hoffman, 2018). After collecting interviews and synthesizing them into a report, it extracts the needs, recommendations, and insights of the community and presents them to policy makers in a persuasive way to advocate support for a program. Oral histories have four benefits: they collect first hand experiences of local people that a program actually affects, it shows the embedded expertise that the locals have, displays knowledge of obstacles that will limit success, and shows a long term view of local needs and the programs that address them (Hoffman, 2018). These histories can show real impacts of a program on real people, putting a human face on a project so decision makers can see the concrete effect of it. An oral history project could help to measure how and when people are using Scott County Libraries, how the library affects their lives, and the barriers they face to accessing the library (hopefully emphasizing the hours). Hoffman recommends collecting facts about the narrator, their perceptions and attitudes, their specific expertise, and recommendations they have to improve (2018). Oral histories can be displayed as audio, quotes within a presentation, a community exhibition, or video.

A respondent to the community needs assessment suggested Scott County should hold a town hall meeting. This is one of the tactics employed by San Diego Public Libraries while assessing community needs to plan for their Logan Heights branch (San Diego Public Libraries, 2002). To gather community input, this project surveyed people via mail, in classrooms, and organized community meetings. They also reached out to local community groups to assess needs and gather more information about the community, including the Boys and Girls Club, a local child development center, the Friends of the San Diego libraries, and a family health center. Scott County could reach out to local community groups like homeless shelters, nursing homes, or schools to ask these community groups about the needs of their members.
Scott County Libraries could also assess local needs with information they already have access to: circulation and gate count data. Surveys can tell us what individuals want to do, but this kind of data can show what people are currently doing and fortify other data and surveys that have been collected. The University of Washington used circulation data to map out the busiest hours across their different libraries, showing that their busiest hours on average are between noon and 4:00pm during the week (University of Washington Libraries 2018). A heat map like this could be useful for Scott County to compare when circulation and gate count is the busiest and compare the data collected across the different libraries. The trends across other libraries could predict busy times at libraries that are not open the same hours. If busy times are comparable among the libraries that are open later, this might show that an Open Library would be helpful for libraries that are open fewer hours, like Jordan or Belle Plaine.

A community needs assessment should do its best to thoroughly assess its targeted community’s needs. If Scott County Libraries wants to reach out to more residents, other methods of survey, interview, or data collection should be used. While conducting needs assessments, it is important to listen to the community and not assume or project our own ideas of what we believe the community might need. Instead, we should ask our community what it needs, just like Evansville Public Library’s Ethel McCollough did all those years ago. To drive this point home, LaFlamme points out that, “Community needs assessment can be a tool of political empowerment and social justice, but only when the initiatives growing out of the needs assessment are developed in collaboration with the community and in response to its real, not imagined, needs.” (LaFlamme, 2007, p. 61). The data collected in this survey shows one part of the community’s viewpoints about Open Libraries. To view the whole picture and assess the needs of Scott County’s community, a variety of methods should be used to gather data. These
carefully chosen methods can help Scott County further assess its community’s needs and how an Open Library may be able to meet them.
References


APPENDIX A

Scott County Open Library Inquiry

The vision for Scott County is to be a community where individuals, families, and business thrive. Following our values of innovation, stewardship, and customer service, we are exploring new ways to make our libraries more accessible for all of our residents. One possibility we are investigating is introducing the concept of an Open Library at some of our locations.

An Open Library would help Scott County Libraries expand existing library hours with self-service technology. The model would allow the public to access library space and materials beyond the current open hours and allow the library to better offer services according to the community’s needs. This model has been very successful in other countries such as Denmark and Sweden, and would be a cutting edge way to increase the community's access to our services in Scott County.

Thank you for participating in this anonymous survey to help us learn more about how this project may help you. It should take less than 5 minutes to complete.

(Note: * denotes questions that required responses)

1. Have you heard of or used a self-service Open Library before?*
   a. Yes, and I have used or visited one
   b. Yes, I have read or heard about them
   c. No, I have not heard of an Open Library before

2. Have you heard of or visited your local public library in Scott County (Belle Plaine, Elko New Market, Jordan, New Prague, Prior Lake, Savage, Shakopee)?*
   a. Visited
   b. Heard of, but never visited
   c. Never heard of or visited

3. Do you have a Scott County library card?*
   a. Yes
   b. No
   c. Don’t know

4. Which Scott County Libraries do you use or visit?*
   a. Belle Plaine (125 W. Main Street)
   b. Elko New Market (110 J. Roberts Way)
   c. Jordan (275 Creek Lane S.)
   d. Prior Lake (16210 Eagle Creek Avenue S.E.)
   e. New Prague (400 E. Main Street)
   f. Savage (13090 Alabama Avenue S.)
   g. Shakopee (235 Lewis Street S.)
   h. I do not currently use any Scott County Library branches
5. How often do you visit a Scott County Library?*
   a. Every day or most days
   b. At least once a week
   c. About 1-3 times a month
   d. Less than once a month, but more than once a year
   e. About once a year, or less often
   f. Never

6. What do you consider to be barriers to you accessing the library? Please check all that apply.*
   a. It is difficult for me to get to the library during open hours
   b. I use library services, but only online
   c. The library does not have the services I need or want
   d. No barrier
   e. Other: _____

7. When would you like to be able to access the library? Please check all that apply.

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<tr>
<th>Time</th>
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<th>Wednesday</th>
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8. What Scott County Library materials and services are important for you to have access to when you visit?*
   a. Browsing books, music, and/or movies
   b. Picking up reserved materials/items on hold
   c. Computers with access to library online resources
   d. Computers with access to the internet
   e. Assistance from staff
   f. Library programming
g. Meeting rooms
h. Other: ______

9. How interested would you be in using the following possible self-service Open Library benefits at a Scott County Library when a staff member is not present?*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Benefit</th>
<th>Extremely interested</th>
<th>Very interested</th>
<th>Somewhat interested</th>
<th>Not too interested</th>
<th>Not at all interested</th>
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<td>Self-service kiosks for checking out materials</td>
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<td>Computers with access for browsing the library catalog and reserving material</td>
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<td>Internet or WiFi access</td>
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<td>Access to library online resources</td>
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<td>Printing and copying</td>
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<td>Book and material browsing</td>
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<td>Reservable meeting rooms</td>
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<td>Study space</td>
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10. How interested are you in using a self-service Open Library?*
   a. Extremely interested
   b. Very interested
   c. Somewhat interested
   d. Not too interested
   e. Not interested at all

11. How willing would you be to travel to a Scott County Library that you don't typically visit to make use of Open Library features?*
   a. Extremely willing
   b. Very willing
   c. Somewhat willing
   d. Not very willing
   e. Not at all willing

12. How comfortable would you be using the library when staff is not present?*
   a. Extremely comfortable
   b. Very comfortable
   c. Somewhat comfortable
   d. Not too comfortable
   e. Not at all comfortable
13. Are there any other services or benefits you would like to see in a self-service Open Library?
14. What questions or concerns do you have about using a self-service Open Library?
15. Are there any additional comments you would like to share about your local public library?
16. What is your gender?*
   a. Female
   b. Male
   c. Non-binary
   d. Decline to answer
   e. Other: _____
17. What is your age?*
   a. Under 18
   b. 18-25
   c. 26-30
   d. 31-35
   e. 35-40
   f. 40-49
   g. 50-59
   h. 60-69
   i. 70-79
   j. 80 or more
   k. Decline to answer
18. Which of the following describes you? Please check all that apply.*
   a. Black or African American
   b. American Indian or Native American
   c. Asian, including Southeast Asian
   d. Hispanic or Latinx
   e. White or Caucasian
   f. Decline to answer
   g. Other: _____
19. What is your total household income bracket?*
   a. Less than $25,000
   b. $25,000 to $49,000
   c. $50,000 to $74,000
   d. $75,000 to $99,000
   e. $100,000 to $124,000
   f. $125,000 or more
   g. Decline to answer
20. What is your occupation?*
   a. K-12 student
b. Post-secondary student
c. Military personnel
d. Full-time employee
e. Part-time employee
f. Self-employed
g. Unemployed
h. Homemaker or stay-at-home parent
i. Retiree
j. Other: _____

21. What is your zip code?*