

Reference Services to Incarcerated People in the SFPL JARS Program:

Reflections and Lessons

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## *Statement of Purpose*

Incarcerated populations of the United States face significant challenges related to information poverty. According to Britz (2004), information poverty is defined as “that situation in which individuals and communities, within a given context, do not have the requisite skills, abilities or material means to obtain efficient access to information, interpret it and apply it appropriately.”

Based on the data presented by Austin et. al (2020), there is a disturbing trend of purposely withholding general information, reference services, and books from inmates, particularly in certain areas of the United States. Evidence suggests that a lack of access to services, such as information about healthcare and food, will cause a large portion of formerly incarcerated people to re-offend in order to have their needs met. Therefore, based on this information, we can infer that library reference services are essential in order to re-orient the incarcerated back into society.

## *Introduction*

This review aims to reflect upon my time in assisting the Jail and Re-Entry Services (JARS) Program for the San Francisco Public Library (SFPL). Three inmates were assigned in order for me to help assist them with their information needs. These questions ranged from the very serious and academic to career-oriented questions, to those related to mere curiosity.

Because imprisoned populations do not tend to have access to the internet, much care must be taken to ensure that all requested information presented in the documents(s) that are returned to the inmate(s). This feat is more challenging than it first appears. Because entire books cannot be easily sent or offered, scholarly articles from the internet and authoritative sites

must be sourced. Depending on the subject matter, these searches can suddenly become much more labor intensive and limited in their scope of being able to answer an information seeker's question. While the average citizen might be able to casually drive to Barnes & Noble, those in the JARS program rely on a 20 page essay, pieced together from multiple internet sources that they are then unable to access and to cross-reference themselves. Austin and Villa-Nicholas (2019) state that LIS professionals are typically white, while most incarcerated individuals are people of color. Additionally, for many LIS professionals, this is their first and only contact with the incarcerated.

My theory is that if the rest of society were held to this impossible standard of seeking information, that this would be extremely detrimental to technological advancement in society at large. Services of this type should be infinitely expanded, in order to reduce prison populations and improve outcomes for impoverished people nationwide in the United States, as well as worldwide.

According to Canning and Buchanan (2018), the information needs of the incarcerated changes depending on sentence length and time left to serve. Many incarcerated information seekers are looking for information regarding what to do when they return to the outside world. There should not be such a glaring information disconnect between those serving time and the general population, lest the incarcerated feel pressure to re-offend.

### *Scope of Reference*

According to Drabinski and Rabina (2015), incarcerated writers "requested information from three main categories," namely re-entry, self help, and reference. The letters in question that I was assigned were no exception to this rule.

In the first letter that I was assigned (Angel), I was asked to outline the history of the state of California. In order to do this, I first searched for scholarly articles and reputable online sources, such as history blogs and the Library of Congress, as well as various historical societies, in order to piece together a concise explanation. The inmate in question was a student writing an assignment for class, so I felt a particular obligation to ensure that these sources were as detailed and accurate as possible. I made sure to include many pictures in this particular assignment of historical artwork and sketches related to the subjects at hand.

In the second letter (Juan), the inmate asked about becoming a professional rapper, as well as general information about the Chinese zodiac, particularly focusing on the Year of the Dragon. This proved to be one of the most time intensive and difficult assignments, as sites such as YouTube lend themselves far better to education on the music industry than blogs and websites. Many of the scholarly articles on this subject focus on the benefits of R&B and music education on the underprivileged, as opposed to general information about becoming a musician and producing albums. When it came to the Chinese zodiac, there were many websites on the subject, though few in retrospect that were considered scholarly or authoritative. This was the other portion of the frustration regarding this second assignment.

The third incarcerated information seeker (Dennis) simply requested a series of obituaries of famous actors and musicians who had died in the past few years. This proved to be the simplest of all tasks, as the New York Times and NPR often have easy access to obituaries of the well-known deceased. I found that these needed no photographs, as most, if not all, of the people requested were well-known enough not to require visual identification.

I found that the most difficult aspect of this service was proper formatting. Making the sheer amount of information required in the average inquiry fit into only 20 pages is indeed the

toughest challenge I've encountered when it comes to reference services thus far. My suggestion for improvement would be to allow the download and exchange of audiovisual files, such as LinkedIn Learning courses and YouTube videos. The general population learns in this way as a primary resource and it seems frankly ludicrous to deny this basic service to inmates.

***Conclusion***

While it is disheartening to see the lack of information services provided to the average inmate, I am relieved to learn that the SFPL is dedicated to ending information poverty for the incarcerated, and to provide services that prevent return visits to the prison system. Jeanie Austin's stellar instruction and scholarly reference work made a difficult task much easier, and opened my eyes to the challenges that the incarcerated still face. I would be interested in continuing this kind of research and to make a habit of helping the incarcerated population(s) reintegrate into society.

***Evaluation Review***

<b>Elements</b>	<b>Comments</b>	<b>Points</b>
Student participated fully in the program by attending training sessions or meetings with staff, and actively responding to assigned user queries.	Rae fully participated in the program and actively responded to assigned user inquiries.	5

Student provided accurate, timely and substantial answers to user queries using a variety of appropriate sources.	Rae provided answers to an array of reference requests and was responsive to requests to remove information.	5
Written responses were professional, informative, educational and written at the appropriate level for the user.	Rae's work greatly improved over the course of the assignment as Rae built skills to provide reference materials appropriate for patron requests.	4
Student demonstrated an understanding of the goals of this program and worked well with both the program staff and colleagues.	Rae was an enthusiastic respondent and worked to provide patrons with needed information.	5
Total Points		19 points possible

*Competencies*

The competencies used in this assignment are as follows: B and C. In competency B, I describe and compare different organizational settings in which information professionals practice. It is evident that one of the places where information professionals practice, albeit sparingly, is within the prison system. It would seem to me that the polar opposite would be the public library, where access to information is available to all without many exceptions. While the prison system is generally closed to information and limited in its scope, the public library expands knowledge and services that are otherwise unavailable to the general public. In a sense, the JARS program does this same task, as one can only hope that these current inmates can become part of the public once more.

In competency C, I articulate the importance of designing programs and services supportive of diversity, inclusion, and equity for clientele and employees. Without support and EDI policies in place, employees and volunteers are unable to truly help and to relate to the incarcerated. Information professionals cannot discover more information for themselves without open access to all issues relevant to them. The underserved are often of diverse backgrounds, and it would seem that all efforts would be wasted if these concerns were not addressed and studied.

### *References*

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