

Remarks by Jill Brantley, Wheaton LAC, April 5, 2011

Drawing on information from the Wheaton Library Advisory Committee, I want to focus on the vital role the library plays in *assisting* in the County's efforts to maintain a safety net, to cope in a bad economy. This focus is necessary because unlike NCAA basketball in which a running total is kept on assists, "library assists," while vital to victory, may get lost in the statistical record. I want to point to four major assists that the library needs to be credited for and the County as it grapples with its budget needs to think about how to maintain.

In thinking about the library's role in terms of "assists," of making the play that sets up the goal, we are acknowledging the now-centuries old tradition in which the library delivers its help by assisting the individual in teaching himself to fish. People come to the library—and 655,000 of the county's 900,000 residents have library cards and an average day sees 21,000 library visits in the County (statistics from "October 5, 2010 Library Snapshot Day" attached)—people come to the library because since before the founding of the country, the public library has been known as a place of hope and help. That reputation gives the County enormous bang for the buck: people go to the library to find help without the County having to spend a dollar on advertising.

**The library assists people in bridging the digital divide**—a divide which is growing rather than lessening because more and more essential information is being put online, more and more job applications have to be made online, the IRS is no longer mailing tax booklets, etc. Any morning at any branch of the MCPL system, one sees people lined up waiting for the library to open so they can access the public computers. There is no other place in the County that offers such a service and has staff available to help with problems.

**The library assists in economic integration, it is the place in the county where people can most easily come together across class lines.** Economic integration is increasingly singled out in education circles as key to raising achievement levels for lower-income students. And while for the schools, economic integration is a hypothesis being tested, at Wheaton and other libraries, it is a positive fact of life. Visit the Wheaton children's story hour for toddlers and up on Wednesdays at 10:30 with a repeat at 11:15 and see economic integration in action. But that integration depends on the library having materials available for its total range of clientele from the affluent to the struggling.

**The library assists people in finding employment, starting or expanding businesses.** On any given day, Wheaton librarians assist job seekers with limited English making phone calls to connect these individuals to services like Montgomery Works which may lead to employment. An October 5 Library Snapshot recorded 96 workforce assistance transactions—one every five minutes.

**But the assistance that most moves me is the way people use the library to cope with strained housing arrangements occasioned by the economic downturn.** People come to Wheaton Library because they find there the civic equivalent of what Ernest Hemingway described as "a clean, well-lighted place." Sharing crowded housing space, people use Wheaton library as a place to think and study and plan. I am recalling a man I see there frequently in the evening, studying English as a second language, using a CASA employment exchange flyer as his bookmark. The library is the place where one's own positive projects receive the strongest reinforcement possible—the presence of other people engaged in similar endeavors.

But right now we are at a crucial tipping point. If the library is to continue its "assists," it needs your help and action now.