

Case Study: New Braunfels Public Library Interview with Gretchen Pruetz, Library Director

Libraries have evolved over the years. From books and multimedia to the increased demand for technology-related services, library staff must be equipped with the skills, knowledge and training to provide library users with high quality customer service. Library leaders, on the other hand, must stay focused on the future, thinking strategically about how the library can continuously support the needs of its users while at the same time partnering with local government leaders to achieve community goals.

The Edge Initiative is a management and leadership tool for public libraries that helps with just that – ensuring the achievement of community goals. At the [New Braunfels Public Library](#) in Texas, Library Director Gretchen Pruetz and her team used their Edge results to shine a spotlight on the library, which has led to a transformation of services the library provides and an improvement of public access technology for all library users and especially those with disabilities.

In this interview, Pruetz talks about her greatest surprise from the results and the importance of having solid data to present community outcomes the library helps to achieve.

Was there an eye-opening experience for you as you went through the Edge assessment?

The biggest surprise for me was the fact that we were not serving the disabled population at all. After reviewing [Benchmark 11](#), we realized that we did not factor serving this population. If there was a light bulb moment, that was it. We totally neglected them, partly because they weren't coming in.

When we were doing research for Edge, I found statistics that show that 8 percent of our population is in some way handicapped or disabled and all we had for them were large print books. We have the Talking Book program that we participate in, but we don't publicize it so people don't know about it. We do have a homebound program, where if you can't get to the library, we'll bring large print books to you and that's all we did. We didn't have any computers, nor did we have any staff expertise other than a station that was wheelchair accessible. We didn't know how to improve the monitors that we had and we didn't know how to use the keyboards, text to voice – we didn't do any of that. We thought the building was ADA-compliant therefore we were servicing that population, but we weren't.

Since getting our Edge results, a staff person has taken an ALA class on serving the handicap or disabled and we are developing a comprehensive strategic plan to address this problem. We are planning to get a fully accessible computer station and are looking at what we can we easily do now, such as modifying an existing station and installing software.

Describe the technology needs for your community and some of the challenges your patrons face.

Other than the local workforce offices, there is no other access to computers and equipment in the community and some of our residents can't get here, so that's still a need for them. The need we're seeing is mainly for printing and scanning and not necessarily providing an actual device to connect to

the Internet because a lot of people have their own devices. There's an initiative in the school district to provide iPads instead of textbooks, and this will make access to the Internet and printing even more important.

Because of this school initiative, we foresee a need to teach classes on device and software programs, and then really promote our wireless access in order for families to really be able to take advantage of those devices.

How does Edge impact your strategic planning?

To me, technology takes on a more focused role and Edge gave me some additional dialogue, tools and data. Between the Edge Initiative, the Impact Survey, and the economic survey conducted by state, I now have the evidence I need to put additional resources to public access needs. We are able to have the hard conversations about what technology should look like. Before, we just didn't have good data to say what we were doing and how it would be effective. We were really only measuring how much wait time we were experiencing per computer. Now we have a whole additional set of parameters to look at to see how we're doing. And in a lot of cases we had the data and we weren't looking at it in the right way or we've made some real simple changes to begin collecting the data. The three big areas we focused on in our strategic plan were bandwidth, the disabled community and staff training.

How did Benchmark 9 help you increase the bandwidth in the library?

[Benchmark 9](#) reinforced what we knew, which was that we needed more bandwidth. We were getting pushback from the City's Information Technology Department. They were saying we should be able to make do with the amount of bandwidth we had, and I really had no evidence to show why we needed more. That was the attitude before Edge. After we looked at the bandwidth benchmark, we were able to make the argument that this is the standard amount of bandwidth that we should be offering our patrons. Because of Edge, I was able to double the bandwidth - we had a national benchmark to measure up to.

What has been the greatest impact on your community?

The visibility within the community for the library and the role it plays has been the greatest impact of Edge. We are re-educating people about the library and what the library today does. We are breaking that stereotype of libraries being only about books. Edge opened the door for me to talk to the United Way, the School District, some of the other nonprofit agencies, the city council, as well as our own IT department. In every talk about our Edge results, I am building awareness of the importance of the library in the lives of our citizens. With Edge, we actually have started a conversation.

Was there a point where this really shed light for your city manager?

Yes. City managers are really busy people, and libraries are not high maintenance. We're not before City Council every other week. We kind of operate on the edges of the city management structure. We're not even as visible as parks because we're not necessarily building big things all the time. So we operate in the shadows. We're really good at doing what we do well without calling attention to ourselves. If we

have limited manpower, we're going to put it towards helping the patron - not building the case to get more help. We're so involved in just getting through each day. The City Manager knew the library was nice to have, but he was not a library user which a lot of city managers are not, so he just really didn't know what we were doing over here. The Edge Initiative and [ICMA](#)'s participation got his attention in a way that no other initiative did before.

Have you used Edge to make connections with your local community leaders also?

Yes, I spoke with some of our community organizations and have started to build relationships with my community leaders. I don't have them on speed dial, but there definitely is a new respect for the library and what we do for the community. If I call our local community organizations like the United Way, I don't start at the bottom. It reset our button. They now have an awareness of all the other things the library does. I'm not going to be put off for a week or two, it changed the starting conversation and we're now seen as a vibrant part of the network that serves the city partners in serving the community. We're now seen as an asset in serving the community especially for the most disadvantaged members.

Is it true that the library is the first department in the city to have its own IT person?

After we went through the process, two things happened related to this. First, the librarian who was our technology person resigned.

Then, in the process of going through the Edge assessment and looking at the needs of the library, I was able to successfully make the case to the head of IT and the Finance Departments that we really needed to fill this position with someone who has a technology background – that the successful candidate would have a technology focus first, and if they could be a librarian too, then great! They helped us write the job description and we talked a lot about the responsibilities for this new person.

Now, we have a dedicated library IT staff person. He reports to me but attends the City's IT staff meeting. His role and this new position have raised the bar with other departments in the city, which is a pretty big deal.

We are the first department to have an IT person devoted to us. It's been critical for moving forward.

If you could change something about your experience with Edge, what would that be?

There wasn't a lot of peer data when we got our results back. I found out very quickly that all people really wanted to know was how do we compare to other libraries. They wanted it to be a grade. Trying to communicate that this is just a locator on the map was really hard because they wanted to know if we passed or failed. That was the most difficult part for me – I wasn't able to say "here's where we are as compared to my peers". We received solid data with our results, but there was still just a lot of explaining to be done.

Internally, I would also change how we get our staff trained. It requires a whole lot more time, and we have to do training in overtime if you will. Right now, we don't have training time built into our staffing and that needs to be a priority. So to alleviate some of the issues, we're building up our volunteers who

will substitute for our front desk staff so they can get their technology training. This idea is getting a lot of push back by mid-level managers. They say the back room check-in process will suffer when volunteers are working, and that will cause customer service to suffer. My answer has to be that staff training is important because that's where we get the real impact for our customers. I'm trying to get staff to understand that failing a person who is trying to use the computer is a more serious failure than a check-in failure, where we might have to go look in the bin to see if something got checked in or not. That's not apples and apples; that's apples and oranges.

What would you say to other library directors who are leading libraries like the New Braunfels Public Library?

I would encourage them to participate in Edge and stress the fact that most of them have the data already and this will not be the burden. They can dramatically increase the effectiveness of their communications with stakeholders about what they need and in a way that makes the economic case for this. It may not happen overnight, but they will have the same kind of tools that the fire department and police department has. They'll have the same kind of communication pieces for standards. The library needs to be brought along. We have a B+ parks department, why can't we go to a B+ library. I would say that's what we saw in talking to other libraries in the area, they are chomping at the bit to be involved in Edge because they see what we've got from it.

What do your patrons see now that they've never seen before in the library?

They see that the public computers in the library work better. When they ask a question now, they are likely to get an answer. We're reconfiguring our lobby area so that we can have a staff member who is always looking at the computer users. They are getting better service, they don't have to struggle as much, and we're taking our user experience much more seriously. We're spending more time with them. There's a shift in the staff attitude and this is more important than talking to somebody about a fine on their account. The people using the computers are the priority, that's big!

I don't think we'd be nearly as far along as we are if we didn't participate in Edge. Without having gone through the Edge Initiative, there wouldn't be so many positive things coming out of the New Braunfels Public Library. I'm really grateful to all those who got us here. It's been a positive thing for the organization. You definitely have a bunch of ready, willing and able candidates in Texas.