

Straight Download Episode 17

Summary

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Episode 17 of The Straight Download features guest host Trenton Smiley, Hoopla's Director of Customer Messaging, filling in for Jeff Jankowski. Trenton and host Ann Ford, Hoopla's VP of Sales and Customer Support, sit down with Annie Miskevich, Executive Director of the Schaumburg Township District Library, to explore what it means for a library to function as community infrastructure, and what it costs to do that well.

Annie's career spans more than 30 years, starting as a shelver, moving through two decades at Chicago Public Library, and culminating in her promotion to Executive Director of Schaumburg in 2019 after the board bypassed a national search. Throughout the conversation, Annie and Trenton trace how libraries have evolved from buildings stocked with materials into trusted, adaptive hubs offering social services, digital access, and human connection, and how library leaders decide what to take on, what to let go of, and how to communicate that value to the community and to funders.

At its core, the episode asks: as libraries are asked to do more with limited capacity and budget, how do leaders decide where the boundaries of that mission should be, and how do they make the impact of both physical and digital services visible to the people who fund them?

Key Themes & Insights

From Collection Warehouse to Community Infrastructure

Annie describes how the core mission of libraries, helping people make informed decisions and connecting them to resources, has remained constant even as the tools available to deliver on that mission have expanded dramatically. What once meant stocking shelves with books now includes everything from digital literacy support to social service referrals, reflecting decades of libraries adapting to changes in technology and community need.

Key Takeaway: The foundational purpose of libraries hasn't changed, but the range of tools and services used to fulfill that purpose has grown far beyond the physical collection.

A Career Built on Institutional Trust

When Schaumburg's previous director departed in 2019, the board had planned to run a full national search but instead promoted Annie from within after two years as Deputy Director.

Annie credits her track record, accountability, and the diverse operational experience she brought from Chicago Public Library's large, unionized environment for earning that confidence.

Key Takeaway: Demonstrated judgment and consistency in a deputy role can outweigh the perceived value of an external search, saving both time and resources for the organization.

The Human Skills Libraries Now Hire For

While the MLS degree remains valuable, Annie emphasizes that empathy, boundary-setting, critical thinking, and comfort with not having all the answers are increasingly what define effective library staff. She shares a story from early in her career of recording practice citizenship-test questions for a patron preparing for his naturalization interview, going beyond a literal reference request to meet a deeper need.

Key Takeaway: Modern library service depends as much on relational skill and creative problem-solving as it does on formal training or knowing the "right" resource.

Knowing What Not to Take On

Annie and Trenton discuss the tendency for libraries to keep adding services without ever sunseting others, what Trenton calls "stacking service." Annie describes discontinuing school field trips after COVID once it became clear the park district was already meeting that need, freeing up staff capacity and reducing duplication. She stresses the importance of slowing down before committing to new initiatives and partnering with already-vetted community organizations rather than taking on every request directly.

Key Takeaway: Sustainable service growth requires the discipline to say no, lean on trusted community partners, and resist the urge to react quickly to every new ask.

Persistent Gaps in Public Perception of Library Value

Despite her lifelong immersion in libraries, Annie acknowledges it was eye-opening to learn that not everyone sees library funding as essential. She now spends significant time explaining the case for libraries as taxpayer-funded infrastructure rather than a nice-to-have, encouraging non-users to see the library as an investment they've already made and should take advantage of.

Key Takeaway: Even seasoned library leaders must continually and proactively communicate library value to the public and to funders, as it can't be assumed as common knowledge.

Measuring Impact Across Physical and Digital Collections

Referencing a prior episode featuring Toronto Public Library's impact research, Annie reflects that she has often treated digital collections as separate from physical services and collections, even though digital access serves the same core mission, particularly for patrons who can't visit in person. Trenton shares how, in a past marketing role, his library used hoopla to extend physical programming, such as pairing an in-branch concert with a related hoopla music collection.

Key Takeaway: Digital and physical collections should be understood as one continuous effort to serve the community, not two disconnected "lanes" of impact.

Digital Access as an Equity and Fundraising Opportunity

Annie notes that community outreach conversations often start with digital resources like hoopla because that's where non-visiting patrons already are, reaching people who may never come into the building. Trenton adds that Hoopla has been working with libraries to incorporate digital access into fundraising narratives, which have traditionally focused on in-branch programming for seniors and kids.

Key Takeaway: Digital collections deserve the same advocacy, storytelling, and fundraising attention as physical library services, especially as a tool for reaching underserved or homebound populations.

Final Thought

What stands out across this conversation is that nothing a library offers happens by accident. Every social worker hour, every partnership, every service that's kept or let go reflects a deliberate call that library leaders have to make and then defend, often at budget time. Annie's career, from shelver to executive director, illustrates how that judgment is built over decades of paying close attention to community needs, staff capacity, and where a library's resources can have the greatest impact. As libraries continue to be asked to do more, the conversation makes clear that thoughtful restraint, knowing what not to take on, can be just as important as expanding services, and that digital access deserves the same visibility and advocacy as the physical building itself.

What We're Reading, Watching & Listening To

Annie (Reading & Watching)

A Little More Social by Nicholas Epley

A University of Chicago professor's exploration of how more genuine conversation and connection can help address rising social isolation and loneliness.

Human Raised by Dana Suskind

A thought-provoking read Annie was introduced to at ULC, exploring how the digital landscape is shaping our social landscape.

Annie also mentioned watching the Lollapalooza livestream from home over the weekend.

Trenton (Reading & Listening)**When: The Scientific Secrets of Perfect Timing by Daniel H. Pink**

A book on matching tasks to the right time of day to improve performance and impact, recommended to Trenton by a coworker.

Jackson 5 catalog on hoopla

Inspired by the upcoming Michael Jackson biopic, Trenton has been rediscovering the Jackson 5 and the Jacksons' music through hoopla's collection.

Ann (Reading)**Pigs in Heaven by Barbara Kingsolver**

The follow-up to *The Bean Trees*, following characters Taylor and Turtle.

Ann praised Kingsolver's research and storytelling, noting the novel's thoughtful treatment of Native American history and adoption, and how its many side stories bring depth to every character.