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National Impact of Library Public Programs Assessment (NILPPA):
Meta-Analysis of the American Library Association Public Programs Office Archives

NewKnowledge Report # IMLS.74.83.02
National Impact of Library Public Programs Assessment (NILPPA): Meta-Analysis of the ALA PPO Archives. (NewKnowledge Publication #IMLS.74.83.02) by is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License by American Library Association and New Knowledge Organization Ltd. 2014.

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Cover photo: A visual depiction of the most important concepts and themes related to programming librarians’ hopes for a national assessment of public programs.

Recommended Citation:

NewKnowledge is a non-profit research institute founded to pursue a deep understanding of how people engage with society’s grand challenges. The organization works to expand understanding of how knowledge is acquired and acted upon in order to promote a strong democracy that enables all people to live to their greatest potential in harmony with the biosphere.
Executive Summary

As the core element of Phase 1 of the National Impact of Library Public Programs Assessment (NILPPA) project, this report offers insight into the current state of public programming and builds awareness about the value of libraries nationwide.

Library-based public programming has become an integral part of library services in all types of libraries and all sizes of communities across the country. Programs often serve the vital function of a gateway, the initial impetus for people to visit the library. Once through the door they may become aware of and benefit from other services provided.

Lectures, performances, discussion groups, workshops and forums of all kinds have dramatically extended the library’s original focus on literacy and knowledge to providing an extraordinary array of new learning opportunities for all audiences. Library programming has long been closely tied to community needs and interests. In an age of extraordinary societal, informational, economic and political change, however, new research is required to assess the relevance and impact of traditional library programming and to guide the future of the library’s changing role in the community.

The ALA Public Programs Office (PPO) has served as a central repository for the collection of data about the status of public programming in libraries. These data have been collected through a variety of efforts, for different purposes, with different measures, resulting in a substantial, but disparate, body of data about the state of public programs in libraries over the last 10+ years. This meta-analysis report documents ALA’s state of knowledge about library public programming, organized by evidence of types of programming, audiences, intended outcomes, and impact.

The scope of materials includes relevant research from the field of library programming, the ALA’s own archival documentation, and a professional opinion survey of 275 programming librarians nationwide.

The results of this meta-analysis are used to identify the gaps and opportunities in public programming research and evaluation work to date and set the agenda for Phase 2 of the NILPPA project. This subsequent phase will implement a research planning process in collaboration with key stakeholders to develop priorities, models, and an action plan documenting the individual and collective impact of public programs delivered by libraries.
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Overview

According to the ALA’s own definition, a programming librarian is one who is charged with any element of planning and presenting cultural and community programs on behalf of the library. To gain insight into this essential work, a nationwide survey was conducted (See Appendix A). This professional opinion survey was distributed through the ALA PPO’s listserv of programming librarians (N=3,916). 275 programming librarians (7% response rate) from across the USA responded with descriptions of their hopes for what could be accomplished through the development of a comprehensive research agenda and five-year implementation plan designed to advance public programs at a national level. The results are telling. Not only did the survey demonstrate that there is widespread desire for such a research agenda; the hoped for results address a range of desired impacts. The value of a research agenda, as described by those who would be responsible for implementing it and benefit most from the data collected, is based upon the following:

The perceived worth of empirical data: Librarians are quick to assert that evidence for the value of public programming exists. They know this intuitively, yet need hard numbers and statistics to prove the value to local and national governments and funding agencies. Programming outcomes and impacts are particularly difficult to measure. Therefore, concrete and objective data are useful for communicating with decision makers and elected officials to show the impact of budget support for programs. Documented benefits can also be used by library advocates at local, state, and national level. In the words of one librarian, programming would benefit from a way to quantify the qualitative feedback.

Getting past attendance as a measuring stick for success: While the advantage of quantitative data is perceived as useful for securing library funding, librarians were less convinced that numerical measures such as attendance rates were an effective measure of program success. Attendance in particular is seen as a poor reflection of the true value of public programming. New metrics need to combine qualitative and quantitative aspects, and, above all, be feasible for libraries to use.

A desire to see how they measure up: Library programming does not happen in isolation. Indeed, as described in detail in this meta-analysis, ALA sponsors many programs and initiatives for implementation nationwide. Yet in addition to this, locally designed programs from one area may be interesting to libraries of similar size or type in a different location. Librarians expressed a desire to cultivate a better understanding of current activities of others across the field at large and develop a systematic way to compare their respective programming experiences.

Increase the perceived value of their work: Many programming librarians feel that public programs have been historically overlooked and undervalued. They hope to increase understanding of why programming is essential, both for public audiences/potential users and those responsible for allocating funds. This desire for increased awareness of the value of public programming was expressed by all types of libraries, not just public institutions. In some places, communities have invested time and money in renovations or new library buildings and hope research findings will demonstrate the value of this investment.

Cost-benefit analysis: With limited resources, how do libraries decide how to allocate funds? Which programs give the most return on investment of time and money? Once a cost-benefit analysis tool has been developed, it should be easy to replicate and have meaningful application in diverse settings and locations.

Effective means of disseminating findings: Research and analysis of public programs will not be useful without also developing systematic methods of disseminating the evaluation results.

The desire to move forward with the design and implementation of a research agenda was clear from the
professional opinion survey. The opinions of programming librarians reflecting upon their own efforts generated part of the data used as the basis for this meta-analysis of the current state of public programming.

SCOPE OF MATERIALS REVIEWED

In addition to the professional opinion survey of programming librarians, ALA archival documentation was analyzed and used to generate this report. The ALA PPO has been regularly collecting data about programs from libraries that receive support through ALA initiatives, although the format of such data reporting has been modified over the years. NewKnowledge staff visited the ALA offices in Chicago, IL and the ALA archives at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign during Fall 2013 to review all records related to supported programs including annual reports, grant applications, reports on impact, and other materials, supplemented by the ALA PPO’s online data records and public documents. NewKnowledge copied 486 documents for secondary review and analysis including digitally scanned programs, reports, proposals, brochures, posters and other promotional materials published and/or distributed by ALA. The earliest documentation dated to March 1987 and the last was December 2013 coincident with the review.

Proposals and reports from ALA-initiated programs were accessed via the ALA application website (www.apply.ala.org). These programs include Bridging Cultures Bookshelf: Muslim Journeys; The Sara Jaffarian School Library Program Award; The ALA Excellence in Library Programming Award; StoryCorps® Your Library; Let’s Talk About It: Muslim Journeys; Dust, Drought and Dreams Gone Dry; and Changing America.

Finally, relevant literature from the field at large was surveyed, in particular a set of recommended readings suggested by the NILPPA Advisors prior to the ALA Midwinter Meeting in Philadelphia January 2014.

METHODS OF ANALYSIS

ALA PPO Archives

ALA artifact details and related documentation were entered into an Excel spreadsheet that served as the basis for an exercise in content analysis and insight gathering. In addition to categorizing programs according to programming type, audience, and expected outcome, a preliminary content scan identified themes and categories that help build an understanding of the ALA’s potential impact areas.

For the programs accessed through the ALA application portal (www.apply.ala.org), metadata was exported and stored in Excel files, then sorted to see if patterns and themes emerged according to library type, location, or size. Applications for these programs had been designated by ALA as belonging to one of four categories: incomplete, currently under review, denied or selected. Proposals were examined for information about target audiences and intended outcomes. When possible, where libraries had been selected for implementation and programs were complete, final reports were reviewed for a description of programming impact.

Programming Librarian Survey

Following receipt of responses from programming librarians, a listwise deletion method was used for participants with responses missing from the two qualitative, open-ended questions. Consequently, these participants were excluded from the qualitative data analysis. Additionally, IP addresses that were repeated in the datafile were flagged and screened for the possibility of duplicate survey response patterns (n=34 flagged). Review of the responses revealed unique response patterns for each of the potential duplicate response sets. Timestamps from these duplicates also indicated that the responses may have been completed from the same computer, but that all of the responses were completed with time differences greater than 8 minutes. The final sample of 275 librarians was analyzed using Leximancer software to
explore relevant themes and concepts. The Leximancer program provided a helpful visual tool to see how different concepts (i.e., recurring words and similar words), formed larger themes and the ways in which they were connected.

Librarians expressed the opinion that an increased understanding of the diversity of library types and purposes will lead to greater effectiveness of programming and community engagement. A future evaluation strategy should acknowledge important differences in programming type and audience according to library type, yet be relevant and adaptable/able to be implemented in each. The four primary libraries categories are Public, Academic, School, and Special. By far the largest number of programming librarians surveyed by NewKnowledge worked at public institutions.

Table 1. Where do respondents work as their main occupation (n=275)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Library</th>
<th>#</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Public</td>
<td>232</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: One respondent did not provide data for this question.
Programming Type

A previous assessment conducted by ALA PPO with the support of Lila Wallace-Reader’s Digest Fund (Wilcox Johnson, 1999) of 461 public libraries serving populations of 100,000 or more and a sample of 1,039 of libraries serving between 5,000-99,999 included nine program types in the study: book discussions, creative writing programs, author presentations/ readings, reading incentive programs, lecture series, musical performances, dance performances, dramatic performances, and film series. All of the nine program types were offered in at least some public libraries. The most frequently offered program type was book discussion groups (61.4%). In addition to these program types, 70.5% of libraries reported hosting locally developed cultural exhibits, indicating the degree to which libraries are truly community institutions.

To undertake the content analysis, NewKnowledge generally grouped programs according to several main categories: author programs, discussion programs, traveling exhibits and summer programming. Following this grouping, the review of the ALA PPO archival documentation performed confirmed the wide range of programming described in the 1999 study but may suggest that these definitions may have expanded in scope. Programming types documented in ALA PPO archives include exhibits, films, music, workshops, crafts, public forums, interactive dialogue, lectures, performance, storytelling, book clubs, digital programming, and distance learning. Some of the programs could be described as “cultural,” featuring themes from the humanities, sciences, and creative arts, while others may represent training or capacity building efforts. The ALA PPO proposals reviewed for this study frequently provided evidence that cultural programming at libraries is often developed in conjunction with community and civic engagement programs or other community-wide efforts. This seemed particularly true for libraries that characterized themselves as being located in communities with high levels of ethnic diversity. This seemed to address an identified community need and an active desire to engage local groups.

Offering diverse and interesting programs was reported in the archival data and survey responses as encouraging people to visit the library, especially those who might not otherwise use library services. This statement, however, was somewhat tempered by librarian’s responses to the survey where they suggested that the public does not know the diversity of quality programs and increased effort is required to get the message out. One programming librarian expressed hope that a well-rounded public programming agenda could reach residents who may not otherwise come into a library. By having engaging historical, cultural, current events and interests programs as well as visual and performing artists we are reaching the broadest possible cross section of the population that we serve.

In some instances, ALA initiates programming that addresses a specific learning need across the country. With Bridging Cultures Bookshelf: Muslim Journeys, a collection of 25 books, 4 DVDs and other programming resources were provided by ALA with funding from the National Endowment of the Humanities (NEH) to help public audiences in the United States become more familiar with the people, places, history, faith, and cultures of Muslims around the world and within the U.S. The Bookshelf was intended to address both the need and the desire of the American public for trustworthy and accessible resources about Muslim beliefs and practices and the cultural heritage associated with Islamic civilizations. In January 2013, NEH and ALA announced that the Bookshelf, for use in presenting public programs in 2013, was awarded to 843 humanities councils, and public, academic, and community college libraries.

AUTHOR PROGRAMS

The ALA PPO website provides resources for libraries hoping to find and work with authors. A noted challenge for smaller libraries with limited resources is attracting well-known authors, as the speaking fees exceed the budget constraints of all but a few institutions. Yet librarians cited
success inviting local authors to come speak, noting that patrons responded well to authors who were familiar with local context and issues. Another successful tactic was incorporating an author presentation within a larger programming initiative. This was frequently the case for ALA programs such as Dust, Drought and Dreams Gone Dry and Changing America. In particular, academic libraries or public libraries close to academic institutions enjoy access to scholars who have written books on related historical or cultural subjects. The ability to showcase these authors augmented the success of programming and increased local interest and attendance.

**DISCUSSION PROGRAMS**

Since launching the first national book discussion series in 1982 (Let’s Talk About It) the ALA has promoted discussion-based community programs at libraries across the country. More recently, the range of discussion programs developed and presented by ALA PPO has expanded to include new media and delivery methods, such as film and audio discussion series, family reading, discussion and storytelling series, theme-based book discussion series, and a radio program/reading and discussion program.

In conjunction with the works included in the Muslim Journeys Bookshelf, the NEH and ALA developed five Let’s Talk About It themes and invited libraries to apply for programming support for scholar-led reading and discussion programs. A total of 125 sites were selected to receive a grant and will present programs through August 31, 2014. A second round of grants to current participants in the Let’s Talk About It: Muslim Journeys seeks to extend additional opportunities for informed discussion through scholar-led reading and discussion programs about the histories, faith, and cultures of Muslims around the world and within the U.S. Participating libraries will plan a five-part series of reading and discussion programs between April 1, 2014, and December 31, 2014, which will take place every two to four weeks, depending on local library preferences. The library is responsible for recruiting a scholar to lead each discussion and for promoting the programs to the widest possible public audience.

The Muslim Journeys Bookshelf and related Let’s Talk About It discussion programs garnered widespread interest from programming librarians. Applications were submitted from libraries throughout the country. This likely reflects the changing demographic of our country as one characterized by increasing cultural, ethnic and religious diversity. Libraries nationwide are attempting to include diverse populations in programming activities and provide space for cross-cultural communication. Reports noted that the topic was considered both interesting and relevant to the audiences, often citing current events such as the aftermath of 9/11 and the anti-Muslim video “Innocence of Muslims” which went viral on YouTube.

**TRAVELING EXHIBITS**

A third category of ALA-sponsored programs, Traveling Exhibits, offer libraries the opportunity to conduct high-quality cultural programs coordinated by PPO.

Changing America: The Emancipation Proclamation, 1863 and the March on Washington, 1963, made possible with support from NEH, helps public audiences understand and discuss the relationship between two seminal events that occurred one hundred years apart. The Emancipation Proclamation and the March on Washington are profoundly linked together as experiences of people demanding social justice. Both were inspiring movements that grew out of decades of bold actions, resistance, organization, and vision.

Fifty sites were selected to present the traveling version of the exhibition in their communities for a period of six weeks, beginning in January 2014 and continuing through December 2017. Sites selected for the Changing America exhibition tour are required to present an opening event and at least two public humanities programs for adult audiences, presented by qualified humanities scholars and related to exhibition themes. In this example of a traveling exhibit, public programming encourages scholar-led
reflection upon and discussion about the major issues surrounding the Emancipation Proclamation and the March on Washington and acquaints new audiences with the history of these two critical events in American history.

Perhaps because of the requirements for this program, ALA received a high percentage of applications from academic, community college, museum, and historical society libraries, as compared with public libraries. Interest was widespread across states and regions, but a slightly higher percentage of Eastern and Midwestern libraries applied for Changing America and were selected by ALA compared with their Pacific counterparts. The exhibit was of interest to a range of library sizes, from those serving communities of less than 25,000 up to 500,000.

Another traveling exhibit, Dust, Drought, and Dreams Gone Dry, developed by ALA PPO with the Oklahoma State University (OSU) Library and the Mount Holyoke College (MHC) Library, features a series of programs designed to help public audiences engage in discussions about the human and ecological consequences of one of America’s most disastrous environmental experiences, the Dust Bowl. According to the ALA application website, the exhibit and programs explore the connection between humans and nature, how human beings respond to adversity; and how people came to understand and to describe the experience of living in the Plains during the Dust Bowl. For this traveling exhibit, ALA received proposals primarily from public and academic libraries. The libraries ranged in size and geographic dispersal. Twenty-five sites will present the exhibition and associated public programs in their communities for a period of six weeks.

SUMMER PROGRAMMING

Through summer learning opportunities at libraries, students who may otherwise lack exposure to reading and writing in the summertime have access to literacy materials and guidance. According to Shrem (2012), this access and its associated programming have demonstrated increases in student engagement and have displayed greater reading gains than students who did not have such opportunities.

COMMUNITY CO-CREATED PROGRAMMING

Recognizing the need for programming that aligns with community needs and interests, ALA endeavors to support programs that libraries are developing locally, often in collaboration with community partners. For example, The ALA Excellence in Library Programming Award recognizes a library that demonstrates excellence in library programming by creating a cultural/thematic program type or program series. Contenders for this award must have engaged the community in planning, sponsorship and/or active participation, addressed an identified community need, and had a measurable impact. The 2013 winner of the ALA Excellence in Library Programming Award was the Carbondale (IL) public library, which brought together more than 35 organizations, businesses and individuals to host, lead and promote compassion-themed discussions and events for the community in a program called 11 Days for Compassion. The program was developed in response to a local Occupy movement and a strike at the university. According to the final report, the project inspired the local community to think about compassion through events and exhibits ranging from small group discussions to large community events. Well over 4,500 people participated in these activities, and thousands more were reached via local media outlets. Through an online evaluation survey, the Carbondale library documented a strong desire among respondents to continue to explore compassion as a theme, and strive to become a more compassionate community. This desire became a reality when, on July 2, 2012, the Carbondale Human Relations Commission voted to serve as the working group to facilitate a campaign to become a Compassionate City.

Even though impact may be difficult to assess, library programs that focus on issues relevant to their constituents’ needs and interests – such as 11 Days for Compassion – seem to be the most successful. Programs...
directly requested by patrons (such as canning classes, basic computer classes, and other hands-on classes) were noted for their popularity. Others reiterated the experience of receiving positive feedback about programs and classes that are practical, rather than those considered too “cerebral.” Gauging what the public wants differs from libraries deciding what the public needs. Librarians expressed the hope that a research agenda might assess community needs as they are identified by the patrons themselves, rather than continuing a practice of basing programming on incidental talent or interest of personnel.

ALA PPO has been responsive to the need for greater library autonomy and has developed programs allowing libraries to create programs that directly respond to community needs and desires. StoryCorps@ Your Library is an Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS)-funded two-year pilot program to create a replicable model of multi-format public programming on broad themes of oral narrative and local history, that may be tailored to specific locales, holidays, or heritage months. Ten pilot libraries across the country will engage their communities by implementing StoryCorps’ interview methods and resources within a framework of high-quality library programming. These libraries will receive a $2,500 stipend, promotional support materials, professional recording equipment, in-person training for library staff and volunteers, tools to offer their patrons to prepare for their StoryCorps interview experience, and access to significant StoryCorps edited content.

SOCIAL SERVICE AND LITERACY PROGRAMS

Public Libraries play a valuable part in supporting adult learning needs, offering instruction, access to resources and technology, and various programs aimed at increasing access to social services and promoting widespread literacy. In this definition, literacy initiatives exceed reading skills – a literate public is well-versed in ways to improve living standards and engage meaningfully in civic life. Examples include health education, financial literacy classes, computer and technical skills, English language instruction for new immigrants, serving socioeconomically disadvantaged populations or patrons with disabilities or special needs. This type of programming is highly responsive to patrons’ self-identified needs. According to Shrem (2012), *The importance of providing programs to support learning is underscored by the fact that such initiatives stem from the expressed needs and desires verbalized directly by such populations.*
Few artifacts in the ALA PPO archives are explicit about intended target audiences, but certain inferences can be made. The term “audience” refers to a specific group of people organized according to a feature they have in common, e.g., a particular demographic marker such as age. When several of these specific audiences intersect and are considered together, they become known as a community. The concept of community as programming audience is in line with the IMLS strategic plan (2012-2016): Healthy, thriving, sustainable communities need institutions that strengthen civic life, understand and respond to community needs, and provide common experiences that knit community members together through common experiences and shared interests (p. 8).

Many possible audience segmentations exist. For example, individuals, experts or amateurs, with an interest in a given topic; families, together in intergenerational groups or separated into children, teens, parents, etc.; social service providers and caregivers; educators and students; public officials and political leadership; language or ethnic minority subgroups; new immigrants and English language learners; and other community stakeholders or partners.

Perhaps the most straightforward way to begin the segmentation of programming audiences is at the broadest level, according to library type. The audience for library programming depends to a great extent on the type of library that is designing, hosting or implementing a given program.

There are an estimated 120,091 libraries of all kinds in the United States today. Public libraries have the widest user base and include users characterized by a range of demographic markers. Academic libraries typically undertake programming related to undergraduate and graduate students, faculty, institutional affiliates, and those in geographic proximity to the institution. The audience for school libraries includes students, teachers, staff, parents and the surrounding community. Finally, special libraries (such as corporate, medical, law, and religious institutions) have a limited audience that is usually closely related to the library’s mission and purpose.

Table 2. Number of Libraries in the United States.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Library Type</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Public Libraries (administrative units)</td>
<td>8,951</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central Buildings</td>
<td>8,770</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Branch Buildings</td>
<td>7,647</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Buildings</td>
<td>16,417</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Libraries</td>
<td>3,793</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than four-year</td>
<td>1,304</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four-year and above</td>
<td>2,489</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Libraries</td>
<td>98,460</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public schools</td>
<td>81,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private schools</td>
<td>17,100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIA (Bureau of Indian Affairs)</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Libraries</td>
<td>7,616</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Armed Forces Libraries</td>
<td>265</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government Libraries</td>
<td>1,006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>120,091</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data retrieved from: http://www.ala.org/tools/libfactsheets/alalibraryfactsheet01

Smith, Hunter and Eckwright (2009) found that public programming is a common outreach tool in public libraries, but far less common in academic libraries. Their article asserts that public programming aligns with the mission of an academic library, and examines the University of Idaho Library’s efforts to attract both university and community members. They offer strategies for location selection, advertising, scheduling and funding.

Proposals submitted to ALA, however, demonstrate that the initiative to undertake public programming in academic libraries is already well established.

Furthermore, programming librarians at academic libraries consider the relationship between campus and community.
to be at the core of their work. Librarians encourage students to think of research as a conversation with community members. Academic libraries are committed to an active role in the preparation of students for lifelong learning, connecting students to avenues for continued education beyond the university walls. Muslim Journeys in particular was seen as an opportunity for people to come together to think and learn together, a way to provide the resources to spark discussion and invite community members into the conversation.

One survey respondent hoped that evidence of the benefits of cross-sector library partnerships might be substantiated by research, stating, I’m a librarian with involvement in library programming for over twenty years that brings together partnerships of libraries of difference types: academic, public, and school. I hope these ties and the benefits of library programming to communities and to persons at all stages of life development might be shown through research.

**SEGMENTATION BY AGE**

The importance of library programming for children is widely recognized. According to a 2012 report commissioned by the New York State Education Department (NYSED): The role that public libraries play in early childhood development cannot be overlooked, as library programs, instruction, and materials may offer the only opportunities children have for exposure to important skills before they enter school (Shrem, 2012).

However, too much focus on children’s programming may come at the expense of older youth/adults. One theme that emerged from the professional opinion survey was the need to expand adult programming, and demonstrate the impact of that programming. Some librarians have felt that their efforts have been disproportionate to the make up of their audiences, noting that adults want to come to the library for their own programs, not just to attend events with their children. A shift to increasing adult programming has been well-received by library audiences, but evidence of impact is still lacking. Programming librarians expressed the need for more information on adult programming:

*As a public librarian, we have focused for years on children's programming. We are now stepping up our adult programming and finding great success with it.*

*I need evidence to support and guide my programming for adults of all ages. I especially see research on emerging adults - ages 18-35 and usually without children - as increasingly important. Libraries have long failed to serve this population directly, and research would be very helpful as we try to expand services in that direction.*

*We need more adult programming in the libraries. This is one of the most neglected areas in the library, and adults are our supporters. We need to make adults welcome in order to get their support when it comes to time for levies/fundraisers.*

The current IMLS strategic plan, Creating a Nation of Learners, indicates the essential function of libraries as promoters of *life-wide* learning. Through public programming these institutions serve as essential and trusted components of the nation's learning ecosystem addressing a need for learning over the course of a lifetime, at every age.

**INTERGENERATIONAL AUDIENCES**

Intergenerational audiences comprised of children, youth, teenagers, young adults, parents, grandparents, and other caregivers have become increasingly important. Increasingly, households where both parents work outside the home is becoming the norm. This results in more use of unrelated caregivers as well and increased desire to spend limited family time together. Libraries are beginning to consider what programming would look like for these audiences collectively, instead of targeting more limited and homogenous groups of learners. Families often seek to create memorable experiences and learn things they can continue to do together. The intergenerational audience usually has its own, distinct agenda: likely to seek activities...
in which everyone is engaged in conversation and exchange. Learning is an interrelated and iterative process between the parties involved.

**DIVERSE COMMUNITIES**

As freely accessible by all people, public libraries have become *highly regarded institutions*, filling a unique social role (Shrem, 2012). They do not discriminate against users, and programming librarians are particularly aware of maintaining this inclusive and non-discriminatory orientation. Actively supporting diversity was an important value expressed in the professional opinion survey: *I would like to find more data that shows how public programming is fundamental to diverse communities and should be supported via staff and funding.* In particular, libraries featuring Muslim Journeys Bookshelf and related Let’s Talk About It events cited the attendance of a diverse crowd, featuring a mix of Muslim and non-Muslim participants. One programming librarian commented: *It is important for our large and diverse Muslim population to see themselves reflected in the literature and public programming offered by cultural organizations like the New York Council for the Humanities, the NEH, and the ALA.*
Intended Programming Outcomes

Intended programming outcomes can be divided into two primary categories: those that focus on knowledge acquisition, where the target audience is expected to learn something, and those that relate to skill-building, enabling people to do something. The ALA PPO archives were instrumental in compiling this expansive list of knowledge and skill areas.

One additional aspect of intended programming outcomes relates to the public perception of libraries – ideally, as relevant, inclusive and culturally responsive.

KNOWLEDGE ACQUISITION

Acquiring information as an intended programming outcome can relate to areas of local interest or to broad national themes. Programming librarians noted that public programs related to local history had the capacity to increase awareness about library resources and the library’s role in the rich history of the community. Broader, nationwide themes may be divided into four major areas: American political history, civil rights and multiculturalism, health and science, and the humanities.

As documented in the ALA PPO archive, goals for knowledge acquisition in American political history have included: increasing understanding of our nation’s origins, learning fundamental concepts of the American democratic system and electoral process; discovering the role of U.S. Presidents, such as George Washington, Abraham Lincoln and Alexander Hamilton, in the wars of their days; and seeing how history has influenced contemporary frameworks for governance and foreign policy.

Further documentation promoted an understanding of and appreciation for multicultural perspectives and the advancement of civil rights, including knowing key legislative actions and Supreme Court rulings. Programming audiences were expected to learn about African American history, engage with ethnic literature, trace their own cultural and ethnic roots, and become familiar with diverse cultural traditions.

Artifacts in the ALA PPO archive give a range of examples of science learning. These may include familiarizing programming audiences with historical and contemporary industrial and technological advances or engaging with professionals to discuss the scientific and ethical dimensions of controversial issues, such as terminal illness or scientific experimentation.

Programs illustrating knowledge acquisition in the humanities have imparted knowledge of world literature, visual arts, music, the role of religion in American identity, and even American pop culture.

SKILL-BUILDING

The ALA PPO archive was also reviewed for programs delivered since 1987 that aligned with IMLS priorities for 21st Century Skills. Though there were many programs that appeared to incorporate this category, the research often suggested an alliance between goals and critical thinking skills. The area is one that should be more specifically examined in future research.

Such skills include the ability to communicate effectively, visual and information literacy, analyzing and problem-solving, collaboration and teamwork, adaptability, creativity, personal and social responsibility, initiative and self-direction. These and others are increasingly considered the core of an educated person in the 21st century.

PUBLIC PERCEPTION

One final intended programming outcome relates to how libraries are perceived by the public. Good programming should be inclusive of diverse audiences, relevant to current needs and interests, and culturally responsive. This, in turn, shapes the perception of libraries as being in service of the whole of the community. Excellence in public programs, reaching a wide variety of audiences, and working in collaboration with others adds to the public perception of the library as an essential public service. It produces an
image of libraries as catalysts for boldly addressing important issues.

Programs like Muslim Journeys directly address the public service role. With this popular program, the ALA PPO has offered libraries the opportunity to facilitate important dialog, to be proactive about building understanding and tolerance for Muslims and Muslim Americans. As evidenced by the overwhelming response to the call for applications, this program is seen by librarians as a way to address a shortcoming in their public programs offerings, for some it is the first time they have focused on arts and ideas related to Muslim culture. This intention—that libraries are seen as welcoming and inclusive—provides incentive for a range of programming initiatives.
Programming Impact

Programming librarians universally assert that measuring impact is critically needed. Repeatedly librarians mentioned the need for data that would justify additional resources and help improve library services. Yet despite this assertion, no standard process for assessment exists and demonstrating impact continues to be a largely aspirational goal. In the application process for the ALA Excellence in Library Programming Award, applicants were asked to describe the impact of the program or program series as demonstrated in the library’s community. Answers to this question varied. Some provided no direct evidence even though asked explicitly. Most cited program attendance or increased circulation of resources connected with the program, others noted the use of comment cards/evaluation forms where positive comments were recorded.

Currently, approaches rely too heavily on anecdotal evidence or are limited to quantitative measures like attendance, both of which fall short of gauging authentic impact. When asked about impact, librarians cited very informal data gathering methods, such as overhearing comments made to library staff: As guests mingled and chatted after each event, many took the opportunity to share their appreciation of the program with staff members. Librarians demonstrated resistance to using attendance numbers, since having fewer participants may actually result in more engaged and participatory dialog. Yet measuring attendance continues to be the low-hanging fruit, one of the few objective measures available to gauge impact and low turnouts are of continued concern to programming librarians in the absence of other qualitative impact measurements:

Debano (2002) reiterates this desire to get past the numbers, which simply cannot determine the overall value of public programming: A common cry at the moment in library science is that output measurements are not enough. Quantitative assessments do not tell us all we need to know about the social function public libraries perform.

Some evidence exists for a mixed methods approach to impact assessment. For example, one library took notice of program attendance, press coverage, comments made during the programs, and Facebook comments and emails received after the events had concluded. We also sought feedback from the groups involved in the planning and execution of the entire project.

Determining impact is related to evaluating two separate variables, as indicated in many of the applications for ALA PPO programming: program content (what was communicated) and delivery (how it was communicated). In the case of the Changing America exhibit we will use surveys to not only assess program structure and delivery but also to ensure that audience members are gaining a better understanding of the content and the historical periods presented.

Sometimes, what could be described as impact depended upon the nature of the program. For a program like Changing America that focuses on historical events with contemporary applications, a key measure of program success was whether participants understood the link between what they were learning about social justice tactics and how that learning could be used to address issues in their own lives and communities.

**CHALLENGES RELATED TO IMPACT**

In the professional opinion survey, programming librarians shared fears they had related to impact. The Leximancer program provided a helpful visual tool to see how different concepts formed larger themes and the ways in which they were connected. As a theme, impact included the following related concepts: negative, learning, and adult. The analysis revealed time/staffing to be the second largest theme, which closely linked with program impact. Respondents expressed concern with the possibility that considerable amounts of library staff time were allocated to...
programming development and implementation, while the programming may have a minimum impact on the community with too much cost to the library: *My only concern would be to find that programming does not have a positive impact on our community.*

Librarians had prevailing concerns that the project might uncover a *low return on investment.* Librarians feared that their investment (time and financial) in public programming was potentially greater than what research data might report as the actual impact of the programming on each respective community. The following two responses sum up these fears and concerns:

*If the research proves that library programmers are planning programs which do not have a healthy impact on understanding and learning, then I guess we’re all screwed. Most of the programs I plan in my narrow niche... are done through donated time or at minimal cost.*

*If the research ‘proves’ that library programs are of little to no value in comparison to the costs - time, dollars, supplies, coordination - I can kiss any hope of sufficient funding from... good-bye.*
Lessons Learned

A review of the library literature conducted by ALA and NewKnowledge in preparation for this proposal revealed that the majority of publications on cultural programs in libraries are descriptive and anecdotal (Benway, 2010; Harris 2011; Hill, 2008; King 2006; Sigala, 1990; Tidy, 2008; Villaseñor, 2004; Weiner & Heinz, 2011) or aspirational (ACRL, 2000; Mandel, 2007; NCSS, 2001; Parsons & Lisman, 1996; Ronnberg, 2000; Scott, 2011a; 2011b; Sheppard, 2001; Shuler, 2007; Sigala, 1990; Smith, 2012). While these well-described research studies about information literacy interventions, digital literacy or other library skills demonstrate that programs achieve goals for target audiences, the results unfortunately do not align to any larger questions facing the future of library programs as a whole.

A notable exception to this tradition is Kranich’s (2001; 2005; 2006; Kranich, Reid & Willingham, 2004) comprehensive inquiry into the literature surrounding the role of libraries in civic engagement. Kranich and colleagues research produced a wealth of information on the logical structural relationship between literacy programs at the school library, community library and specialist collections related to increasing public engagement. In this understanding, public engagement is aligned with countering the trend toward isolated lack of knowledge about public process and deliberative democracy. Kranich and colleagues developed a taxonomy for assessing program impacts on their publics. Yet this research did not propose common metrics or measures that might help shape a national research agenda to aid librarians in contributing to a body of knowledge that serves the entire field.

EMERGING ISSUES

Among the critical issues to be considered in planning a research agenda are ones that are not thoroughly explored in this meta-analysis. Nonetheless, they have become increasingly important in shaping goals and programs for lifelong learning.

These include the following:

An analysis of the learning impacts of different program formats: When are lectures more effective than workshops? How does active audience engagement impact outcome? What kind of approaches does your audience want? How do you incorporate different learning styles?

The impact of technology and the internet on how people prefer to learn: What is the impact of self-driven learning on public programs? How can programs be presented as more personalized?

The need to identify community issues more specifically: How can the library listen to the community? What are the most effective ways to gather input? Who should be at the decision making table as programming is developed?

The library as part of a learning community: Who are the most effective partners for libraries? How can a network of learning institutions support a stronger learning community?

Programs for an intergenerational audience: With an increasing interest in learning together how are audiences changing? How do libraries serve an audience of grandparents, parents and other caregivers, and children together? What are the desired impacts?

Partnerships beyond the community: How can the library serve as a public forum for emerging issues that are identified in the worlds of science, politics, health, etc.? What conduits to such emerging information can be established? What are the risks?

Establishing shared and meaningful metrics of evaluation: How can a culture of evaluation become more widespread, practical, and useful? What are the core metrics that would create a coherent and comprehensive picture of the impact of library programming nationwide?
Critical thinking skills at the heart of learning: Can libraries build an emphasis on and awareness of critical thinking skills into programming? What kinds of programs would demonstrate an incorporation of such thinking skills into the discussions, products, and outcomes of public programs?

Common to all of this review has been the persistence of anecdotal information about public programming in libraries, but scant research that evaluates impact or proposes models for best practices across the field. Assessing the state of library programming on a national level will increase understanding of how library programs increase broad public access to knowledge and foster support for lifelong learners across diverse geographic, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Missing from the analyses are insights into how public programming decisions are made, especially those that are designed to respond to community needs. Despite the frequent mention of addressing community needs as an overarching goal, it is difficult to see such a process in action. The literature did not reveal a consistent approach to the selection of themes and titles or community input. The overall lack of information on program selections, along with the paucity of evidence of public impact, seriously impacts the library community’s needs for best practices and fresh guidelines.

LIBRARY PROGRAMMING IN A LEARNING AGE

The issues identified in this report as significant topics for the discussion of future programming are almost all from the concept of the world in a new learning age. The widely-used term lifelong learning is not a new concept, but it has taken on a new urgency and importance in the last few decades. The driving force behind that urgency is the speed and all-pervasive nature of change in the modern era. Change is not a short-term trend, but a state of being in the 21st century, and it demands human adaptation of all sorts, especially in the need to become learners across a lifetime.

To stay abreast of change, rethink threatened values, make sound decisions, participate in our communities, families and nation, develop new skills, and strengthen our own identities and self-worth, there is nothing more imperative than learning.

Most learning in this intense environment will be learner-driven, fueled by personal motivation and styled to meet individual needs. It is already estimated that most of us gain only 9% or our education in formal learning environments, i.e., schools. The enormous bureaucracy of most of our public school systems is burdened with old systems, tied more to the industrial age than the knowledge age. More and more responsibility for providing resources, models, and access to learning is falling outside of the school system. In addition, the extraordinary developments in all kinds of technologies are transforming our social, societal, economic, and community lives. Although none of what is written here is new to any of us, what is most profound are the challenges, opportunities, and imperatives for the learning institutions of our communities – the libraries, museums, media organizations and others – to assess the implications of all of this change to their own practices and public responsibilities.

INFORMAL LEARNING

As noted, informal, self-directed learning is very different from the formal lessons of classrooms and curricula. It is notable for its personalization. It is often characterized by a sense of immediacy and relevancy. It is intentionally sought out and highly intrinsically motivated. Such personal motivations may be to obtain new skills or information, to take on more responsibility for one’s own well-being or to become more closely engaged with others. Meeting the needs of the new learner requires an understanding of his/her learning needs. Consequently, one key consideration in planning a research agenda is determining the most effective methods for assessing the audience’s learning needs.
THE IMPACT OF TECHNOLOGY

Libraries have already stepped to the fore to provide access and training in the use of new technologies. This well-known role is likely to continue as the new programs, applications, and technologies continue to emerge. Research has already determined, however, that the personal role of the librarian in providing these services is essential – a service that will continue to have implications in educational programming for libraries. In addition, the access to information provided through technology is one of the driving forces shaping the new learner. This new learner can tailor-make his/her searches to personal needs. At the same time, however, the social conditions of learning are harder to maintain in an era when group problem-solving and collaboration are touted as important ways to work. Consequently, the opportunities for people to learn together may be ones of importance in future programming.

CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS

For the past decade a national dialogue about the importance of 21st Century thinking skills is changing the focus of education. In an age of rapid change and an environment glutted with information, it is increasingly important to have the skills to sort, analyze, judge, adapt and recombine that information. Creativity and problem-solving, innovation and skill at collaboration are becoming the most desired skills in many environments. Today’s lifelong learners are seeking a range of new literacies, including information and media literacy, along with civic, health, and environmental literacies. To meet the demands of a complex society, learners must be able to work across disciplines, to take initiative and assume personal responsibility. The teacher of the past is increasingly the facilitator of the present, working with students to guide the development of their thinking skills. How will continuing education, formal or informal, respond in the development of new programs?

THE LEARNING CITY

Across the globe, cities are being redefined, taking on such labels as Smart Cities, Digital Cities, Legible Cities, and, quite prominently in Europe, Learning Cities. The definitions of these terms are quite fluid, but what they have in common is a commitment to building partnerships and networks across the city that enhance the quality of life for its citizens. When IMLS envisioned collaborations between museums and libraries, and ultimately its program entitled Museums, Libraries and the 21st Century Learner, the agency was responding to the new demands of the learning age, the impact of technology, and the potential of collaboration. The concept of a Learning City expands that early initiative by recognizing that every city has numerous informal learning institutions that, joined together, would create an unparalleled learning environment. Not only does the Learning City concept envision the city as campus, it also defines ways to bring neighborhoods together, support more participatory government, and create many routes toward learning for all. Although transforming the whole of the city sounds daunting, considering program partnerships one at a time and defining collaboration as a civic virtue are possibilities that hold great promise.
Looking Forward

Americans for Libraries Council (2007) assesses the evolving field of library valuation and notes the advantages of recent technological developments on gathering data:

*The growing sophistication of library technology platforms has created a direct feedback loop between library administrators and the communities they serve. In most cases these data are easily accessible, cumulative, and quickly available for decisions related to acquisitions, product development, and fund raising. With the right expertise and guidance, libraries can do their own research and create evidence-based briefs for use in conversations with local leaders and stakeholders. (p. 16)*

Despite these improvements, a lack of research that evaluates impact or proposes best practices across the field persists. In the past twenty years, evaluation methods have started to emerge as recommendations for best practices in conducting individual program evaluation (Bimber; 2003; Nitecki, 2004; Reta & Brady, 2007) there remains a need to fully consider how to develop common goals and objectives for evaluation in order to develop a more evidence-based practice that can build a shared knowledge about the public impact of library programs and the social value of libraries.

Some library researchers, however, are sensing that these traditional econometric measurements are providing limited insight into the broader social capital that libraries create and the social benefits they bestow. Consequently, researchers are beginning to turn their attention to the difficult problem of articulating a value proposition that can be expressed in social as well as economic terms and presented in credible and evidence-based advocacy arguments (Americans for Libraries Council, 2007, p. 16).

Ultimately, the promise of every one of these new ideas needs to be tested. Creating a cycle of collaborative goal setting, engaging the audience and the library, and measuring outcomes is critical to creating and sustaining successful new programs. A research agenda may want to include testing approaches to defining common metrics and integrating useful evaluation at all levels of the library’s programming efforts.

The challenges noted in this report will be important for ALA to consider as a nationwide research agenda is developed and implemented. Problems relate to the current lack of longitudinal studies, established best practices for data collection and dissemination of findings, human and financial resources needed to do data collection and analysis while involving all relevant stakeholders in the process, and a diversity of research methods that allow data to be triangulated.

Yet despite these obstacles, enthusiasm for embarking upon a collaboratively designed research project is clear. In the words of one programming librarian, there is hope that future research conducted by ALA will shift the conversation from data’s value as an accountability tool to data’s value as a decision-making tool, better equipping libraries everywhere to develop more effective programming.
References


Appendix A

SURVEY OF PROGRAMMING LIBRARIANS

The American Library Association (ALA) Public Programs Office is working with New Knowledge Organization Ltd. (NewKnowledge) to explore the value of public programming in libraries across the country. Our objective is to develop a comprehensive research agenda and five-year implementation plan that will strategically advance public programs at a national level. In part, this project is made possible by the Institute of Museum and Library Services.

This work will help us understand how library programs increase public access to knowledge, and support lifelong learners across diverse geographic, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds, including those with special needs or those underserved by community services.

We believe that library programs are critical to the health of communities. We are looking to you, as programming librarians, to help us with this project by weighing in with your professional opinion on several questions.

Q1 Based on the description above, what do you hope might be discovered through the project, which could advance public programming?

Q2 Conversely, do you have any fears or concerns about what the project might find, which could have a negative impact on public programming? Please describe.

Q3 How would you describe the type of library that is at the center of your work? (Select all that apply.)

- Public (1)
- Academic (2)
- School (3)
- Special (please specify) (4) ____________________

Thank you very much for your contribution to this important work to advance library programming! We will provide updates on the project as it progresses in the coming months.
NewKnowledge Report # IMLS.74.83.02

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