

Summary Report: ALA Midwinter Meeting Workshop in Philadelphia

ASSESSING THE NATIONAL IMPACT OF LIBRARY PUBLIC PROGRAMS

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Prepared for: American Library Association, Public Programs Office

Prepared by: John Fraser, Beverly Sheppard, Rebecca Norlander

Correspondence: John Fraser jfraser@newknowledge.org

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SUMMARY

On January 24, 2014, the Public Programs Office of the American Library Association facilitated a one-day workshop at the ALA Midwinter Meeting in Philadelphia. In attendance were key stakeholders who serve as advisors for the National Impact of Library Public Programs Assessment (NILPPA). This group included ALA staff and programming librarians who are knowledgeable about the state of public programming in libraries. The workshop was the initial gathering of invited stakeholders to begin planning for a comprehensive research agenda to understand and document the characteristics, audiences, outcomes and value of public programming in libraries at a national level. The discussion that resulted from that meeting is the subject of this report and will help shape the framework for a collaboratively designed research project.

This short report is organized according to an exploration of the following topics. First a statement of project goals, followed by the who, what and why of library programming that underlies the need for developing comprehensive evaluation. These elements will be the target of metrics and evaluation strategies to be developed by the ALA PPO. The report incorporates a wide-ranging discussion of potential components of a programming model, programming impacts to be evaluated, implications of community engagement and methodological considerations to inform the research plan.

Project Goals

The American Library Association (ALA) Public Programs Office (PPO) has received grant funding from the Institute for Museum and Library Services to plan a comprehensive research agenda and implementation plan to study the outcomes of library public programming on a national level. The primary goal of this first phase of planning is to determine the research framework that will ensure that all library stakeholders will have the breadth of information they need to make policy and investment decisions that leverage the infrastructure and expertise of libraries in the area of public programming.

To that end, secondary goals include: to examine trends emerging from recent studies; to shape a general framework for describing public programming in libraries; to identify gaps in current knowledge and practice, and to develop the research strategy to serve the field. The workshop participants further acknowledged current trends in today's social environment that affect the nature of public programming. These include growth in intergenerational learning, self-directed learning, greater audience diversity, community relationships, the scaling back of resources in social and cultural services, and technology-aided learning. The workshop conversation recognized the important role of libraries in filling gaps in the education system and in strengthening the social fabric of their communities through enriched learning opportunities. It identified the current nature of public programming in libraries while also drawing from current literature and expertise on learning, evaluation, and research. This report documents the core components of the conversation.

The Who, What and Why of Research

Participants attending the workshop included ALA staff and programming librarians from around the county who are especially knowledgeable about the state of public programming in libraries. The NLPPA advisors present were:

- Frannie Ashburn, Library Programs Consultant, former Director of the North Carolina Center for the Book at the State Library of North Carolina (retired 2011);
- David Carr, Library Consultant, former Associate Professor, SLIS, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill (retired 2012);
- Terrilyn Chun, Systemwide Program Coordinator, Multnomah County Library, WA;
- Henry Fortunato, Director of Public Affairs, Kansas City Public Library, MO;
- Janine Golden, Assistant Professor, SLIS, Texas Women's University, and
- Manju Prasad-Ra, Instructional Media Center Head, Long Island University, New York.

Together, the ALA staff and NLPPA advisors identified the most important components of library programming, the Who, What and Why. They further explored the essential issues that must be addressed through research and strategy design. The main points emerging from these conversations are distilled here and organized to support the next planning meeting. The group sought to answer the following questions:

Who are the individuals and groups intended to be impacted through public programming?

What are the outcomes libraries should expect to achieve with target audiences? And, *What* are core elements or principles of program design that are critical to achieving those outcomes?

Why do public programs exist as part of a library's identity? What are the goals and objectives that guide public programming in libraries?

PROGRAMMING AUDIENCE: THE "WHO" OF PUBLIC PROGRAMMING

Public programming has increasingly become an essential service of libraries of all kinds and sizes, integrally connected with the heart of the library's mission. As one workshop participant expressed, "programming is not something added on to what we do, it is what we do."

Behind this statement are a great many questions about who is doing the programming, what specific training they have had, how programming decisions are made, and, ultimately, what is the "value added" of library programming? What impact does it have on the many audiences it serves? Thus, as adult cultural programming has grown substantially, so too has the need for a comprehensive research program that will provide practitioners with access to best practices and to guidelines for new programming opportunities. A starting point is to identify the target audiences for such programming.

One core characteristic of the knowledge age is that audiences are increasingly segmented. The idea that "one size fits all" is no longer relevant in an increasingly individualized and customized world. Consequently, programming librarians are developing programs for more and more specialized audiences, whose interests and needs are highly diverse. Program content and format are designed for the audiences who are most likely to experience meaningful impact from program implementation and execution. Content varies considerably from current affairs to reading clubs, from skill-based learning to dynamic forums. Each is designed to serve a specific audience group. The upcoming research and evaluation planning must address the relationship between intended program outcomes and their specific audiences.

Potential audiences include:

- Individuals with an interest in a given topic, which may include experts, hobbyists, or those with general curiosity
- Families (together in intergenerational groupings or separated into children, teens, parents, etc.)
- Social service providers/caregivers/those serving others
- Schools and universities (academic community members, including educators and students) in gatherings that augment and enhance curricula or meet special needs such as preparation for History Day, research guidance, summer reading programs or book discussions
- Public service and political leadership
- Language or ethnic minority subgroups
- Diverse community gatherings where differing perspectives are of considerable value
- New immigrants
- Other community stakeholders and partnership audiences

The group did not consider this list exhaustive.

ELEMENTS OF PROGRAM DESIGN: THE “WHAT” OF RESEARCH

In addition to selecting appropriate and desired topics, successful programming will require sensitivity to programming principles, such as, format strengths and weaknesses, language use, level of audience expertise, and unintended discrimination. All must be balanced and understood in order to accomplish the intended goals and objectives. These elements include developing programs that may be:

- User-oriented, programs that may be identified by user requests and needs

- Collaborative, involving participation of a range of stakeholders from a variety of community perspectives, often to explore local problems or new opportunities
- Accessible to various literacy levels
- Varied in the nature of activity, from participatory and hands on to listening and responding
- Reflective of a community’s diversity
- Closely correlated with specific library resources
- Built upon themes that are multi-dimensional and open-ended
- Founded in equity, assuring they do not exacerbate social hierarchies
- Reflective of the ethical standards of libraries and librarians to serve freely and impartially

GOALS & OBJECTIVES OF PROGRAMMING: THE “WHY” OF RESEARCH

Designing a framework for any research agenda requires first identifying criteria for measurement. Such criteria are the “book ends” to the goals and objectives established for each program. They reflect the nature of the targeted audience and the implications of incorporating the kinds of library principles addressed above. Program goals demonstrate the same level of diversity as audiences and program formats. The NLPPA advisors identified the following as among the frequent goals and objectives:

- Get people to read
- Get people to think
- Stimulate conversation
- Validate people’s ideas and interests
- Provide a sense of belonging
- Stimulate interest in new content
- Teach life skills
- Teach application of technology to life skills
- Open people to other perspectives

- Provide transformational opportunities
- Give people a voice
- Provide information to elected officials
- Encourage problem-solving
- Increase curiosity
- Introduce new resources
- Raise excitement about diversity
- Cultivate critical thinking skills
- Enhance public awareness of library professionalism

The group also noted that some goals are internal to the libraries themselves, such as:

- Raise the credibility/significance/commitment to public programs within a library
 - Raise public awareness of the library's commitment to serve as a forum for public conversation
 - Build relationships with other community resources
 - Attract funding from diverse sources
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Additional Research Implications and Observations

Moving from the compilation of audience types, program designs and goals and objectives to research methodology led the workshop participants into a deeper discussion of the scope and definition of the concept of “impact.” There was concern expressed about the enormous complexity of measuring the depth of impact and the tendency to design for specific outcomes that lend themselves to easier assessment. What would be the appropriate range of indicators that might capture the more subtle changes happening in both the individual and the audience as a group?

Examples of these deep level impacts include:

- Indicators that might document a deepening of the trust and reciprocity happening between citizens;
- A palpable change in an individual’s or group’s thinking
- A growing sense of confidence in oneself
- The generation of new questions
- A recognition that something in a program “pushed one’s mind”

The concept of “impact” has many levels and requires ongoing thought. The group asked: Is setting up “measurable impact goals” sufficient to gauge the full impact of library programming? Could this approach alone actually be counterproductive to encouraging dynamic and organic programs? For example, how could we measure the deeper goal of stimulating memorable intellectual experiences? To what degree does goal setting hamper spontaneity, improvisation, and dynamic shifts in thought? Are there alternatives to traditional evaluation methodology that could document changes in group dynamics and intellectual processes at work? Would it be appropriate/useful to embed a trained observer in the audience? What kinds of goals can be quickly assessed and which require longer periods and more complex follow up? These questions should continue to be addressed as the planning process moves forward. They may lead to the

possibility of designing a suite of research/evaluation methodologies to provide a more comprehensive picture.

The group further discussed the implications of the many variables that are at work in defining and delivering library programs. One is that of training for the position of library programmer. What are the competencies that are necessary to be an effective program director? How much, if any, attention is given to this aspect of library work in Library and Information Graduate Studies Programs? Who determines the resources that are directed toward adult cultural programming, and are there best practices that could help decision making in individual libraries? The discussants suggested that defining competencies and measurement models more specifically might help develop an across-the –profession consistency.

METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND QUESTIONS

A research strategy is designed for the systematic collection and analysis of data in order to meaningfully explore a phenomenon. Certain methodological considerations are essential for developing an effective framework. With a variety of different research methods possible, the ALA PPO needs to determine a strategy that will best document the value of public programming going forward.

Following are the methodological considerations and questions distilled from the conversation.

The purposes and uses of a national research agenda

The stated purpose of this project is to *ensure public and private sector leaders have the information they need to make strategic policy and investment decisions that will further leverage the infrastructure and expertise of libraries*. That statement is accompanied by a shared understanding that the recipients of library services, public

programming in this case, are the ultimate beneficiaries whose lives are enriched as a result of their participation.

What kind of evidence is necessary to validate the impact of programs?

Evaluation is a powerful management tool. It can provide internal governance and management with information useful to make budget, hiring, and resource allocation decisions. Consequently, great care must go into determining what kind of evidence will validate any reporting of program outcomes. Participants raised concerns that evaluation not focus on head counts or cost analysis based on attendance. They cited that librarians traditionally spend as much time as necessary with a user to help them resolve a research question. Programs, like other library services, must be considered for their value and change impact, not solely focused on numbers served.

How will funders & policymakers use the data?

Are there discrepancies between what outside stakeholders and library staff may want to hear? Is there a tendency to distort or select data categories because of what funders want to hear? Some discussion focused on using the research data to educate stakeholders on the most important values of library services. Others noted that collaboration with the community is valuable in aligning goals. This question is especially important in validating the role and position of the library in the community. How might libraries reposition themselves and become more visible to the whole of the community by using the positive outcomes of research?

How can research support best practices in library programming?

The research agenda will need to include methodology that captures components of best practices across a range of program types. Some discussion explored issues of who directed and owned programming, how programming decisions were made, what competencies were regarded as essential for library programmers. The research framework

will need to include ways to assess process as well as impacts.

How will the cooperation and buy-in of libraries be assured?

Conversation explored how to assure widespread buy-in across the library field to both the process and the use of results.

ALA staff spoke to their commitment to keeping the planning process and eventual research implementation as fully transparent as possible so that libraries are well-informed of the progress and purposes of the project before their participation is requested. The group noted the practical issues as well. For example, it will be necessary to create research tools that are scalable and adaptable to different sizes and types of libraries. Libraries must see the benefit to themselves of participating in a national study. Thus data collected must resonate with the needs of various library types. In addition, a project that is considered burdensome to staff is not likely to receive much support.

A number of suggestions explored the application of technology to the process. Could a uniform survey, for example, be web-based and widely accessible? Could ALA support a central portal where results are submitted and coordinated to provide consistent national data? Could there be a menu of options that could be tailored to meet specific needs. The question of how to use technology most effectively should be explored by the next stakeholder group.

How will a national research initiative interface with the principles and ethics of library practice?

One of the most significant questions that must remain at the heart of a research plan is “What are the principles and ethics of the library field that must be reflected within the research framework? Does asking questions of library patrons run counter to the basic principle that libraries protect each library user’s right to privacy and

confidentiality with respect to the information sought or received? How might research methods assure their subjects that the data sought is anonymized in a way that respects individual privacy? Should data collectors provide library users with the opportunity to “opt out” of research questions? If we start from the point of view that

a patron's interest in engaging in certain programs is proprietary, what are the implications for broad research studies? Though no conclusions were reached, the topic of the interface of research studies and library ethics must remain a question for further consideration.

Next Steps

The issues and concepts discussed by the participants during the Philadelphia workshop will undergo deeper exploration at an upcoming stakeholder meeting to occur in Chicago (May 8-9, 2014). The Chicago workshop will engage participants in small workgroup discussions that seek to articulate the field's research/evaluation needs and prioritize the critical research questions that should be addressed by a national audience. The participants will work to clarify research questions, give them priority and outline the steps necessary to move the agenda from conception to implementation, determining the best methods and strategies for aggregating data that will be most useful to the library community and its supporters.