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Take Action

I’m writing this just a day or so before it is due and once again (as with the past few issues) the pandemic and simmering social unrest are top of mind. Is it surprising that library workers are feeling anxious and burned-out? Not only are they dealing with their own fear and anxiety, but customers with extra needs are coming in to those libraries that have reopened. Patrick Lloyd, one of the chairs of PLA’s Social Workers in Public Libraries Task Force, wrote an excellent article on this topic for Public Libraries Online (www.publiclibrariesonline.org/2020/06/prioritizing-staff-mental-health-when-reopening).

One way to combat feelings of powerlessness and vulnerability is to take action. For libraries, that can translate to helping your staff and citizenry engage in the national conversation. To that end, in this issue you’ll note a civic engagement thread. In the “On My Mind” column, two library workers detail the impact San Francisco public librarians have had while acting as contact tracers during the pandemic; in “EDISJ Matters” you’ll read about two libraries using civic engagement to promote equity in their communities; and in “Best Practices” the author shows libraries using civic engagement to promote equity in their communities; and in “Best Practices” the author shows...
In a year that is piling up with surprises and disappointments, we find ourselves in yet another sad situation, the retirement of Barb Macikas, executive director and fearless leader of PLA. Barb retired at the end of August, leaving a rich legacy of accomplishments and contributions to the field of public librarianship. The PLA Board is working with Tracie Hall, executive director of the American Librarian Association, to create a process to seek a new director for PLA.

It will be difficult to replace Barb, whose commitment to libraries and library workers goes back to 1982 when she started her American Library Association (ALA) career with the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL). Since then she has held multiple positions in ALA Conference Services, the Reference and User Services Association (RUSA), and the Association of Specialized, Government and Cooperative Library Agencies (ASCLA). Barb also held multiple positions within PLA itself before becoming executive director in 2009.

Over Barb’s tenure at PLA, public libraries have shifted from being more passive service providers to active community agents. PLA has modeled a similar shift, responding to needs the field identifies, scaling solutions, and working collaboratively with libraries, library workers, and strategic partners.

Barb played a key role in PLA working in partnership with the Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC) to develop Every Child Ready to Read (ECRR). This work has changed the way public libraries approach the core service of early childhood literacy. Most public libraries now consider this a primary component of support for children, families, and communities.

Barb led her team to work with member leaders and the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) to develop and grow public library leadership offerings, including the successful PLA Leadership Academy and the Inclusive Internship Initiative Cohort. Again with support from IMLS, she and the team worked to develop DigitalLearn.org to support digital literacy training needs within libraries (and beyond).

Barb’s strong strategic thinking and planning allowed for important PLA projects such as ECRR, the PLA Leadership Academy, and DigitalLearn.org to be sustained beyond their initial grant period. She led the board and staff to be thoughtful about meeting
library needs and planning for sustainability while being rigorous in the stewardship of the association’s resources.

Through Barb’s leadership, PLA has been an innovative, forward-thinking organization. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, PLA was ready with virtual training while other organizations had to quickly learn how to provide it. Barb oversaw the expansion of PLA continuing education into virtual training a decade ago.

Barb is a servant leader, always listening carefully to staff, board members, and the membership at large. When PLA President Carolyn Anthony brought the idea of improving performance measurement, Barb acted quickly to pull together a task force, which ultimately resulted in a $3 million dollar grant for Project Outcome, and the hiring of two new staff members to support the work. PLA saw the value of Project Outcome in the field and has worked hard to integrate this outcome focus in its own programs and services to members, as well as building awareness and collaboration with other ALA units, including ACRL, most notably.

One of the most beloved PLA services is the biennial PLA Conference. Barb supported the growth of this awesome event to include the popular Big Ideas sessions and other special events such as the 2020 micro volunteering and community engagement opportunities, making the conference a must-attend event for public library workers.

While our field has a long journey ahead to be inclusive and equitable in our individual libraries and communities and in our professional organization, Barb has helped lead the way in supporting conversations about race, social justice, equity, and inclusion. In 2017, she supported the formation of the EDISJ Task Force which continues to do great work and lead the way.

This is the tip of the iceberg. Barb’s lasting legacy to our field is epitomized in the three-year process of working with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (with the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions and the Technology and Social Change Group at the University of Washington Information School) to secure the Legacy Grant, ensuring a healthy financial future for PLA. This provides us the ability to continue to convene, collaborate, innovate, and advocate to meet the needs of public library staff and the communities we serve.

Barb has been a valued collaborator inside ALA, working across units to represent public libraries and share innovation. She has been a key partner to external organizations, including raising the profile of PLA internationally. And she has been a fantastic leader and mentor for staff who are encouraged to experiment and explore interests, fail, learn and try again without ever losing sight of member service and value.

I know those of you who know Barb will miss her. Those of you who haven’t had the chance to meet her have still benefited from her leadership. I will miss her. One of the bonuses of being PLA President was going to be working with and getting to know Barb better.

I’m lucky though, as Barb will become more of a neighbor, as she starts to spend more time in my state, Colorado, as she welcomes a new grandchild into the world. Chicago born and raised and a proud Southsider, Barb will continue to spend time in Chicago as well. My guess is we might see her around. Barb is so committed to public libraries and our mission that she even volunteered as an Illinois public library trustee. Thank you for everything, Barb!
2021 ALA MIDWINTER VIRTUAL

The American Library Association (ALA) Midwinter Meeting & Exhibits will take place virtually January 22–26, 2021. Highlights include:

- Symposium on the Future of Libraries: sessions on future trends to inspire innovation
- Interactive author events
- Awards celebrations
- A virtual exhibit hall with presentation stages and keynote presenters
- Live chats, networking opportunities, and more!

Follow the hashtag #alamw21 and visit https://2021.alamidwinter.org for the latest updates.

WRITE FOR PUBLIC LIBRARIES

ALA’s only journal devoted exclusively to public libraries, Public Libraries (PL) offers important industry news, PLA/ALA updates, and columns and features that offer strategies and ideas that can make a difference in your career. Submissions are invited and encouraged. If you’re interested in writing a feature article or a shorter opinion piece, please contact PL Editor Kathleen Hughes at khughes@ala.org to discuss your idea and deadlines. It is ideal to contact us far in advance of the issue you are interested in writing for. To see future themes, deadlines, and more information, please read our editorial guidelines www.ala.org/pla/resources/publications/publiclibraries/writeforpl/editorialguidelines.

PLA CALL FOR WEBINAR PROPOSALS

If you have an idea for a webinar you’d like to present for PLA, we encourage you to submit a proposal. The deadline for submissions is November 30. Responses will be sent within four to six weeks. Webinar proposals are reviewed on a biannual basis. Proposals submitted by May 31 are considered for presentation in August or later; proposals submitted by November 30 are considered for presentation in February or later of the following year. If accepted, submitted information may be edited for editorial style and clarity by PLA staff. Visit www.ala.org/pla/education/onlinelearning/webinars/proposal for more information and to submit a proposal.

SOCIAL WORK INTEREST GROUP

Join the PLA Social Work Interest Group (membership not required) on ALA Connect for conversations, documents, and resources that will help your library provide the best service to patrons. Visit http://bit.ly/36FdQyb for more information.
PLA NEWS

PLA’S 2021 EARLY LITERACY CALENDARS—NOW AVAILABLE!

For the third year in a row, PLA has developed an Early Literacy Calendar, featuring daily literacy-building activities that libraries can share with families in their communities. These bright and colorful calendars are downloadable and reproducible. Based on the Every Child Ready to Read practices of reading, writing, singing, talking, playing, and counting, each download includes twelve months of learning activities, book lists, nursery rhymes, and more.

The calendar pages include daily skills-building activities, and the reverse contains supplementary content such as nursery rhymes, early literacy tips, song lyrics, and suggested reading material. The calendar pages are also customizable with each containing a designated spot to add your library’s logo and contact information. Libraries nationwide have used these calendars to help parents and caregivers engage with their children in early literacy activities every day of the year.

Herrick District Library (HDL) in Holland (MI) has incorporated the 2020 Early Literacy Calendar into its online resources by creating a gallery of early literacy activities and caregiver tips, which includes on-demand videos of children’s librarian sing-a-longs and book recommendations. View HDL’s gallery (https://communitycollections.herrickdl.org/HDL/early-lit-calendars) to get ideas on how to maximize the 2021 calendar activities in your library!

The calendar is available for purchase and download from the ALA Store for $23.99 (for PLA members), $26.99 (for ALA members), and $29.99 (for others). Visit www.alastore.ala.org/PLA2021calendar for more information.

PLA WEBINAR: “PROVIDING LIBRARY SENIOR SERVICES IN A COVID-19 WORLD”

Wednesday, 11/18/2020; 1 to 2 p.m. (Central)

According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), eight out of ten deaths related to COVID-19 are individuals age 65 years and older. While we might not be able to visit our seniors or facilities in-person for the foreseeable future, library staff can still reach this population while they shelter in place.

During this webinar, David Kelsey of the St. Charles (IL) Public Library District and Glenna Godinsky of the Gail Borden Public Library District (Elgin, IL) will recommend tips and tricks for serving the senior demographic during COVID-19. Visit www.ala.org/pla/education/onlinelearning/webinars/senior for more information and to register.

PLA’S LEARNING TAPAS OFFER BITE-SIZED PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

In October, PLA released two new professional development resources available exclusively to PLA members. Learning Tapas are quick, self-paced videos with corresponding guidebooks designed to provide a “taste” or introduction to the topic at hand. The first is Effective Networking Skills, which sets the participant up for success with guidelines, space for self-reflection, and additional resources. The second, Finding a Mentor or a Coach, includes goal setting, working agreements, and mentee responsibilities. The Learning Tapas videos and guidebooks are free to all PLA members and can be found in the PLA Member Library in ALA Connect (ALA member login required). Contact customerservice@ala.org if you have difficulty logging into ALA Connect or if you would like to join PLA to gain access to these member benefits.
Before COVID-19, the San Francisco Public Library (SFPL) system was the jewel in the city’s crown and a model for other libraries across the nation. SFPL was the first to have a team of social workers working in the library; it started an innovative program called FOG Readers to help children overcome reading difficulties, and in 2016 started a series of programs to help adults learn how to navigate conversations about race with children. Moreover, with annual visits in excess of 10 million, SFPL is critical to the mental and physical well-being of many San Franciscans. (As parents of small children, we can personally attest to how storytime sessions, amply stocked open playrooms, and fine-free lending for children have saved our sanity.)

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the temporary closure of all 27 branches at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic threatened to have profound adverse consequences for many, not least of all the library workforce, most of whom were furloughed. However, the story of how the city’s librarians were mobilized as part of the city’s COVID-19 response, even despite closures, offers a model to other
On My Mind / The Jewel in San Francisco’s Crown

cities. The death rate in San Francisco remains one of the lowest in the US, despite being the second most densely populated American city, which is in no small part due to the devotion and commitment of the city’s librarians. As San Franciscan citizens and public health professionals, we want to highlight our deep gratitude for how SFPL stepped up in extraordinary ways.

On March 17, 2020, faced with an increasing number of COVID-19 cases, Mayor London Breed instituted a shelter-in-place order requiring all of the city’s libraries to close. Soon thereafter, many of the city’s librarians were mobilized as disaster service workers, responding in a myriad of different ways. Contact tracing, the process of reaching out to close contacts of those infected with COVID-19 and supporting those individuals to get tested and quarantine, was identified as a key role that librarians would be able to fulfill. As a consequence, an initial cohort of 41 librarians were trained as contact tracers. Over the following five months, an additional 55 were deployed to support the contact tracing effort, with several taking on expanded roles, leading contact tracing teams, managing programs, contributing to quality improvement initiatives, and training new staff. While the work was not a perfect fit for all, the core skills of many of the city’s librarians was a true match for the task at hand. Contact tracing demands curiosity, attention to detail, commitment to serving the community, and an abundance of compassion; all competencies that the SFPL tracers have in spades.

The scale of the COVID-19 contact tracing response is a clear indicator of impact; librarians reached the vast majority of the 8,000 contacts reached by the city between April and August. Moreover, the dividend of their efforts is evident on the city’s COVID-19 data dashboards; a healthcare system that has not been overwhelmed; and far fewer deaths per capita than many other similar sized American cities. If existing efforts are sustained, the incidence of new COVID-19 cases in San Francisco may remain low enough that the libraries can soon reopen. When they do, it will be due in large part to the industry and effort of SFPL’s own staff.

As public health professionals, intimately involved with the city’s contact tracing program from its inception, our motivation in documenting SFPL’s contribution is threefold. First, we want to state our deep gratitude for the work of the SFPL team. It has been a career-defining privilege for us to work with people so talented, innovative, and collaborative. Second, we want to highlight how this work has the potential to change and transform the SFPL. This pandemic has impacted certain neighborhoods and communities far more than others, exposing stark health inequities in our city. Redressing those health inequities not only demands an overhaul of our public health response, but also a rethink on how our public libraries can be catalysts for change. With a better understanding of how our city’s public health system works, our librarians can be agents for that change, especially in those communities where inequities abound. Thirdly, COVID-19 has revealed the huge opportunities that exist for public libraries to play an expanded role in supporting the core functions of the Department of Public Health, linking people to healthcare, supporting health promotion activities, and caring for the city’s most vulnerable populations. While many of these functions already exist, the SFPL contact tracing collaboration is evidence for how better coordination between different institutions of city government can have synergistic impact.

COVID-19 represents the greatest threat to public health in our lifetimes. Although we have much to learn about the pathogen, the epidemic, and its consequences, the virus has made one thing clear: for any crisis that threatens our city, the problems of any of us are the problems of all of us. How SFPL responded to this pandemic threat offers a model of hope and action; it is also evidence of why the public library system maintains its rightful place as the jewel in our city’s crown!
Libraries Doing the Work

Civic Engagement through an EDISJ Lens

Katie Dover-Taylor and Amy Reyes

To explore library civic engagement through the lens of equity, diversity, inclusion, and social justice (EDISJ), we decided to highlight work being done at both large and small public libraries. We recently spoke with Melissa J. Sanchez (she/her), community services programs manager at the Austin (TX) Public Library (APL), and Tonya Garcia (she/her), library director at the Long Branch (NJ) Free Public Library (LBFPL), to learn more about their civic engagement work.

Sanchez and Garcia are at different stages of their library careers. Sanchez started in the nonprofit world. Before taking on her role at APL, she most recently worked at the Literacy Coalition of Central Texas. Sanchez currently leads an outreach team that provides services to people experiencing homelessness, immigrants and refugees, children, and areas in Austin that do not yet have a brick-and-mortar branch. Garcia has spent her nearly seventeen-year career at LBFPL, starting as a library assistant and ascending to the role of director. Garcia has also served as the president of the New Jersey Library Association (NJLA) and has led her staff in developing innovative initiatives that have been recognized and replicated at the state and national level. (Editor’s note: The following responses have been edited for length and clarity.)

How does your civic engagement work promote equity at your library and in the community at large? How do you support and engage marginalized communities in your area?

Melissa Sanchez (MS): This year, we’ve partnered with civic organizations, other departments in...
our city and county governments, and businesses that have built trust with Austin’s marginalized communities. This coalition is helping to support a complete Census count, including Austin’s most vulnerable populations. We are also working to get every eligible voter in Austin registered to vote in time for the November 2020 election. This civic engagement work is non-partisan while also centering equity.

Civic education is critical—it keeps the public engaged and connected to the wide spectrum of resources available through the library. The more we can listen to and provide services for our historically marginalized communities, the greater impact our library can have on the community at large.

Tonya Garcia (TG): As a former teen mother and high school dropout myself, I view my responsibilities as a public library director through a lens of civic engagement. Believing poverty, especially information poverty, to be one of the primary reasons for almost all of our social problems, I set out to try my best to equip our library with the tools, vision, and motivation to combine knowledge, skills training, and unique services to help break these cycles and promote a positive quality of life. It was my moral and civic responsibility to give back to both the community and the profession that changed the course of my life.

We intentionally set out to focus on specific vulnerable positions in our community by establishing a civic and community outreach plan. Staff members each selected a segment of our populations and began to establish a plan to foster engagement, gathering resources and contact information of key figures within those populations (when possible) and then designing programs and services to meet their needs. Some areas of focus are on immigrants, seniors, LGBTQ+ people, people with disabilities, women, non-registered voters, and more.

We promote equity at the library and in the community by building programs and creating initiatives that help ensure we are all beginning at the same “start line.”

What have been some of your most impactful programs?

MS: This year we have combined forces with the county, the Census Bureau, and local nonprofits to help get families and individuals counted and registered to vote while they wait for food or PPE distributions at drive-thru events all around the city. These events have been packed with people due to the pandemic. At each event we’ve seen up to 600 households come through and either receive information on the Census and voter registration or complete the Census and get registered to vote that same day.

We’ve also been able to reach people experiencing homelessness by hosting a walk-up event at one of our downtown branches where many individuals are camped near and around the branch. In Texas the deadline to register to vote is thirty days before the election and the Census deadline is looming, so it was pretty clear that our efforts had to marry the two to reach people who have the least access to government and public resources and services. The goal was to reach our communities where they already were because we could not welcome them into our branches.

Another avenue for civic engagement is our new Vimeo channel, APL+. We’ve produced video content promoting the Census and voter registration in English and other languages (available at https://vimeo.com/449468964 and https://vimeo.com/449472822).

TG: Among our many impactful programs is the Fresh Start Reentry Service. As a Latina woman, I conceived the idea of providing library support services for citizens returning from prison to local communities from my own personal experiences both within my family and my community. My passion for criminal justice reform grew after seeing many of my own community members, including relatives, returning to prison. Having watched the cycles repeat too many times, I began to research recidivism and the connection to information poverty and low literacy (especially
among black and brown communities). I believe that since almost everyone can agree that the public library’s bottom line or “currency” is literacy, it is our responsibility to fill those educational gaps and help solve the social injustice of mass incarceration.

In 2009, I created and launched Fresh Start in LBFPL’s technology lab. Over the years it has been tweaked based on the direct feedback of our citizens. The program allows for up to twelve private, individualized training sessions (tech or career), private social work appointments (we are the first public library in New Jersey to hire a full-time social worker), and resource referrals. Through this work I joined the New Jersey State Parole Board’s Monmouth County Reentry Task Force. Through this partnership it was decided with full support of our mayor, council and the board of trustees that we would become the first library to serve as a NJ Department of Parole Reconnection Center. These relationships enabled me to expand LBFPL’s calendar of offerings and renovate the main library’s lower level to include a state of the art movie theater, classrooms, and a boardroom that anyone can use for free.

Realizing it was bigger than just my city, I reached out to the New Jersey State Library, which has been an ardent supporter of my work and suggested a partnership so that we could expand this program statewide. To broaden this effort, the state library applied for and received a $628,774 National Leadership Grant sponsored by the Institute of Museum and Library Services. The state library will use the grant funding, in partnership with the New Jersey State Parole Board and the New Jersey Department of Labor & Workforce Development, to provide public libraries with a model to build their capacity to serve returning citizens. My belief is that when a person is released from incarceration—they should make three stops. Family, parole/probation, and their local public library.

How are you adapting to provide civic engagement resources or programming during the pandemic?

MS: We’ve created online content for APL+ and have adapted to do virtual storytimes, book clubs, and creative content. We have also requested that our patrons and members of the public participate or submit their own content for APL+ videos. We’ve relied on signage at our curbside check out branches to promote civic engagement and remind people that they need to complete the Census and can get registered to vote at any of our curbside branches.

TG: We have transitioned most of our programs online. We also have continued our Fresh Start Program by offering one-on-one sessions “curbside.” We have been mindful of hosting discussions, offering book collection lists, and creating programs and policies that foster social justice and civic engagement.

How would you recommend libraries get started with civic engagement work? Do you have any advice for library workers looking to promote civic engagement in their communities?

MS: There’s so much out there already! It’s so important for libraries to be connected at the various levels of their local and statewide community as best they can. Everyone providing in-person services to communities is not doing it alone. Good partnerships can provide greater access to staff, volunteers, and resources. This is also hard work—the more people and groups can pull together to help the easier it is on everyone.

I would advise library workers to get in touch with anyone in their area who is providing what our most vulnerable families and individuals need right now: food, housing, employment assistance, and preschool and K-12 education support. It’s likely that their response to this year’s challenges needs or has room for participation and action from their local libraries.

TG: Design a plan. Have staff members volunteer to ensure buy-in. Explain your vision in detail. Lead with transparency. Do your research: look toward...
libraries and state and national associations for examples and tap into available resources.

Do not let anyone steal your passion. Expect resistance. Change is difficult to embrace for many. Resistance is usually about the person and not the presenter. Understand that one of our primary responsibilities is civic engagement, so it is not an “extra” service or program to enhance your library, it is critical. With an engaged community comes a stronger society. Not to mention that informed and engaged communities tend to be avid library supporters and users.

Is there anything else you’d like people to know about your work?

MS: I work with some of the best people in the city! They are committed to a continued transformation of our library system so that it can be an even greater place to work and a more transparent and inclusive place for the public to access materials, find vital community services, and engage in programming. We are working to help everyone in Austin navigate this year’s challenges and collectively address the ones ahead.

TG: I am a strong proponent of knowing your why. Know why you’re setting out to engage the community, or start a service. Drill the why down until you’re confident it’s not about ego and then go for it! Take risks. Fail. You’ll be better for it! 

Library Space-Planning Guide

Library Space Planning: A PLA Guide (PLA, 2019) is a publication for library professionals to successfully analyze, plan, and evaluate library spaces. It was authored by branding expert David Vinjamuri, facilitator of PLA’s Regional Workshop on Space Planning for Libraries. The guide is available for purchase as a digital download. Visit www.alastore.ala.org/content/library-space-planning-pla-guide for more details or to purchase a copy.
PLA 2020: Ten Essential Programs consists of ten articles highlighting educational programs that took place at the PLA 2020 conference. Chapters include: An Empathetic Approach to Customer Service; We’re Doing WHAT?! Working Through Transitions and Institutional Change; Library Space Designed by Library Staff; What Your Onboarding Says About Your Organization; Socialized Justice; Mentoring to Diversify Librarianship; Book Matchmaker; Early Literacy in Unexpected Places; Navigating Hot Topics with Media Literacy Skills; and Pitching and Producing a Library Podcast.

Available via the ALA Store. To order your copy visit bit.ly/3ccl8O2.
PUBLIC LIBRARIES strive to be “community living rooms” that place as much emphasis on shared experiences as on the physical collection. These equalizing spaces connect diverse community members to trusted information and open conversations in a safe and welcoming environment. Noting that Americans have “too few opportunities to hear diverse views and engage in authentic dialogue about pressing problems,” Nancy Kranich cites David Lankes’ pre-pandemic assertion that libraries of the future should “shift from focusing on the collection of artifacts to the facilitation of knowledge creation through conversation in a safe environment.”

Stacey Abrams also writes of pre-COVID libraries as public squares or “a convening space for those who normally would never touch one another.” She states, “It’s incumbent upon our state and federal government to figure out how we best finance our library systems to ensure that this public convening space that has been a part of our nation for more than 200 years continues to be a safe space for participation in our democracy.” Yet, shuttering of buildings has created a barrier to maintaining accessible public spaces. In a time when connecting with others is crucial to fight isolation, public libraries across the country are finding new ways to offer online experiences of participatory democracy and civic engagement.

28th Amendment: Brooklyn Public Library
BPL Presents, the programming team at Brooklyn (NY) Public Library (BPL), provided opportunities for participatory democracy through its 28th Amendment series. The conversations began in early March 2020 and will lead up to the November election. Library branches held 32 moderated conversations in multiple communities, including classes of local high school students. BPL Presents and constitutional lawyers from the American Civil Liberties Union collaborated on a short introductory video about the Constitution, shown at the beginning of each conversation. As BPL’s Vice President of Arts and Culture Jakab Orsos notes, the series sparks discussion about “where
the constitution is silent, redundant, or simply wrong and ideas regarding the most important areas that the nonexistent new amendment, the 28th, should address.4

Each conversation includes three key questions:

1. What protections, ideas, or language would you like to see included in the U.S. Constitution? Based on the information shared in the video, or on the thoughts that motivated you to join us today, what sentence would you like to see added?

2. In this present moment of the Coronavirus, when so much has been so swiftly and fundamentally changed, what new protections would you like to see included in the Constitution?

3. Whoever wins the upcoming presidential election will face a United States that is charged, challenged, and changed in ways it has not been before. What new Constitutional amendment would you want that president to heed?5

The questions can be adapted to include current events, such as Black Lives Matter protests and the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, that occurred during the series.6 As Orsos notes, “Democracy is a continuous discussion, if not a debate, over our values, our morals, our rules, checks and balances, and for that matter the flaws and sins of our society.”7

Recurring themes include universal health care and basic income, voter suppression, and reentering society for those previously incarcerated. A group of artists, activists, and lawyers will form the “Framers,” tasked with compiling a draft. A composer will set the text to music and a performance art project will allow the public to send postcard messages to the White House using manual typewriters. The new amendment will be unveiled before the November election and printed on large foam boards for display at BPL locations.

BPL held one in-person conversation before libraries closed, and the transition to a virtual format was beneficial. As Orsos explains, “Discussions were more open, less ceremonial. The entire participation felt more genuine and honest: people were sitting in their living rooms, in their kitchens to reflect on their lives and fellow participants’ ideas.”8 For libraries hoping to create a similar series, Orsos emphasizes the importance of planning. He states, “The video is not necessary, but a properly scripted introduction is. This is a copyrighted project and we’d be happy to guide anyone through the planning.”9

Oakwood is an affluent, 98% white inner-suburb of Dayton, Ohio, a city which itself is very segregated. White privilege really hit home for us, and I was nervous about the possible response from the community. Would people be angry and defensive? I couldn’t have been more wrong. Over fifty people from all over our region attended the three-hour event, and many in the diverse crowd stayed afterwards to continue talking. It turns out people were desperate to talk about racism and how it affects all of us.10

WMPL made a commitment to continue conversations on racism. Partnering with Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ), the library hosted a discussion on Ibram X. Kendi’s 2019 book, How to Be an Antiracist. Initially planned for March 2020, the program was rescheduled to a virtual conversation in May. The library also

LET’S TALK: Wright Memorial Public Library
In 2014, Ohio police fatally shot John Crawford III, a Black man who was holding a BB gun that was for sale inside the Beaver-creek Walmart. A few years later, Wright Memorial Public Library’s (WMPL) Adult Services Librarian Elizabeth Schmidt attended facilitation training at the American Library Association’s (ALA) Annual Conference. Upon returning home to neighboring Oakwood, Schmidt scheduled a community conversation on white privilege. Partnering with Catholic Social Services, the program featured clips from the film White Like Me before moving to discussions in small groups. As Schmidt describes,

Wright Memorial Public Library’s (WMPL) Adult Services Librarian Elizabeth Schmidt attended facilitation training at the American Library Association’s (ALA) Annual Conference. Upon returning home to neighboring Oakwood, Schmidt scheduled a community conversation on white privilege. Partnering with Catholic Social Services, the program featured clips from the film White Like Me before moving to discussions in small groups. As Schmidt describes,

WMPL made a commitment to continue conversations on racism. Partnering with Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ), the library hosted a discussion on Ibram X. Kendi’s 2019 book, How to Be an Antiracist. Initially planned for March 2020, the program was rescheduled to a virtual conversation in May. The library also
hosted a summer series focused on current events with themes such as “Understanding Whiteness,” and “Slavery and its Consequences.” As Schmidt describes, “We were able to put these together quickly because we have experience talking about racism, were already working with a great partner, and had two months of experience with online programming.”

WMPL’s Let’s Talk programs follow one of two facilitation models: Conversation Café or Living Room Conversations. Conversation Cafés are hosted dialogues intended for public spaces. Ideally held with six to eight people, conversations are guided through progressive questions using six “agreements” to maintain civility among participants (www.conversationcafe.org). Living Room Conversations are designed to “facilitate connection between people despite their differences, and even identify areas of common good and shared understanding” (www.livingroomconversations.org). The website offers almost 100 guides to help facilitators broach difficult topics through conversation.

Transitioning to a virtual format has uncovered some challenges. A lack of access to or familiarity with technology can hinder participation. Schmidt finds that conversations take longer online, visual cues are less obvious, and multiple breakout groups are harder to monitor. However, the format can also be more convenient for some, with participants expressing gratitude that virtual programming is an option during the pandemic.

Schmidt’s advice to others hoping to offer a similar series is to jump in and give it a try. She states, “It’s okay to start small, and it’s okay to fail. If no one shows up change the topic and try again. Survey your attendees—What do they want to talk about? Ask them what they liked and what suggestions they have.”

Schmidt also emphasizes the importance of support from the entire team. WMPL administrators regularly participate in conversations, and staff is trained to lead conversations. As Schmidt describes, “Wright Library is loved by everyone in our community, and we realized the library was in a position to bring people together and make a difference. Our LET’S TALK series promotes in-depth conversation, intentional community, respect, active listening, and problem-solving among neighbors.”

Kilpela pre-records interviews with local experts via Zoom, and then schedules them as posts on Facebook and PWPL’s website. She chooses topics based on community need, such as the city’s response to COVID-19, telehealth medicine, and mental health issues. Library staff also suggests topics, including social distancing’s impact on education and the importance of diversity in the community. Kilpela writes interview questions in advance, limited to about ten questions, and always including how PWPL can help the community heal from COVID-19. As Kilpela describes, PWPL patrons trust the library as a place to find reliable information on a variety of topics. Informal conversations are a great way to share information that is authentic, relevant, and, at times, raw. In this time of COVID-19, it’s been a way to connect people who have information with people looking for it.

Kilpela plans to continue the series in a virtual format even as libraries reopen. She notes that people may hesitate to attend

**Community Conversations:**

**Peter White Public Library**

Peter White Public Library (PWPL) created a Community Conversations series in response to the pandemic that isolated communities in Marquette (MI). The project aims to connect the community with trusted, relevant information from local sources. As Jenifer Kilpela, PWPL’s communications coordinator describes, “I wanted to ask all those questions people at home were asking in their kitchen. I also wanted to talk with more than just officials, who were interviewed so much in those early days of the pandemic. And to keep it local.” Kilpela sees the series as a virtual extension of PWPL’s status as the community living room, “a place where such discussions happen organically.”

Kilpela plans to continue the series in a virtual format even as libraries reopen. She notes that people may hesitate to attend
in-person programming for a while, and a virtual platform can increase access to relevant information for homebound individuals and those who are immune-compromised.

Conclusion
Any discussion of online programming needs to address potential obstacles due to lack of equitable access to connectivity. ALA’s Executive Director Tracie Hall calls for universal broadband to be a “determinant of individual and community viability, and, like the right to read, a human right.” When library buildings close, patrons can lose their only access to the internet, and the chance of participating in virtual programming. Public libraries are helping bridge the divide by lending hotspots, devices, and repurposing bookmobiles as mobile hotspots to connect communities. Although not a permanent solution, these efforts help reduce barriers to offering public convening spaces in an online format. Through virtual conversations, public libraries are continuing to serve as safe spaces for participatory democracy and civic engagement when access to library buildings is limited.  

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“Wildfires Damage Libraries” by Suzanne LaPierre  POSTED OCTOBER 18, 2020
Burning books—often a symbol of oppression—is one of many tragic consequences to the massive wildfires that have terrorized California, Oregon, and Washington this year. Three million hectares have burned in those states, making it the West Coast’s worst fire season in at least 70 years, according to Science. A few libraries have been lost entirely, and many more are impacted by smoke and unhealthy air quality, as well as loss of materials that were checked out to residents with damaged homes. Read the entire article at http://publiclibrariesonline.org/2020/10/wildfires-damage-libraries.
For some libraries, a 3D printer may have arrived one day to great fanfare, only to have gradually devolved into general disuse over the course of time. Where did it all go wrong? While 3D printing is an exciting technology with tremendous potential for libraries, it is essential that we take the time and effort to promote it at our organizations. Here are some simple strategies for boosting, or maintaining the momentum of 3D printing at your library.

**Increase the Visibility of Your Printer**

Simply put, no one is going to use your 3D printer if they’re unaware that you have one! If your printer is currently hidden away from the public, consider relocating it to a spot with greater visibility. This need not be on a permanent basis. Placing your printer on a cart can allow you to easily move it about the building, giving you increased flexibility during these uncertain times.

To address sound, smell, and safety concerns that may arise in a more public venue, consider placing the printer inside of a see-through enclosure. This will help muffle printer noise, suppress filament odors, and prevent potential injury to patrons placing their hands near the printer while in operation.¹

Keep in mind that an active printer is far more engaging than one that is sitting idle—so ensure that you keep yours humming. If you have outstanding print jobs for staff or patrons, you should of course, prioritize these. If, on the other hand, you are free to pick your project, there are several considerations to make. Since you’re trying to showcase your printer, you should select tried-and-true jobs that have low potential for failure. The 3D-printing process is slow, so choosing prints that can be completed in an hour or less will give your patrons a greater likelihood of witnessing the entire process. You may choose items that can capitalize on public interest; think of the massive popularity in Baby Yoda, for example. In addition to appropriating pop culture clout, seasonal and holiday-related items can also draw interest.

In the current pandemic environment, there are a number of practical items you can print that...
Promoting 3D Printing at Your Library

The Wired Library

can help contribute to public health, while also demonstrating the capabilities of a 3D printer. Searching free repositories (like Thingiverse.com) will yield results for face mask ear protectors, face shields, and touchless door openers. Such items are generally quick to print, highly practical, and can easily be branded with your library’s logo.

While your 3D printer is obviously the centerpiece of any public display, there are a number of other components you can use in its promotion. What programs and services are associated with your printer? What is your printing policy? Organize this information into flyers and place them around your printer. If this information is available digitally, you can forego the paper and instead use signage to direct patrons to your website. Do you offer multiple colors and material types? Have samples on display. Finally, make a resource list of free design software and online file repositories, which can help empower your patrons to utilize your printer.

Targeting your Message

When engaged in a marketing effort, it is important to tailor your message to your audience. Looking at 3D printing, there are a number of specific types of customers for whom 3D printing holds tremendous potential. For example, consider would-be inventors in your service area. For this group, producing a prototype (and expensive) part of their process. Happily, prototyping is something that a 3D printer is perfectly suited for. To draw the attention of the inventor community, you should emphasize the relatively low cost, incredible accuracy, and quick turnaround time of 3D printing in marketing materials. Another group to consider is that of tabletop gamers. Games like Dungeons and Dragons, Pathfinder, and others commonly utilize 25mm and 28mm miniatures. These miniatures can be prohibitively expensive for many, especially if they are seeking customized models. Printing a few display pieces from free online repositories can quickly build excitement around your printer. As many libraries commonly host these games, you may have the opportunity to speak with these patrons directly.

In addition to these examples, there are a broad array of hobbyists for whom 3D printing may be of interest. Model railroad collectors, drone enthusiasts, and cosplayers can find premade designs or create original ones to be rendered using the library’s printer. Regardless of the hobby, your approach should be to print a proof of concept, then reach out to your target audience to build awareness and excitement around your 3D printer.

Programs Lead to Usage

To truly have 3D printing take root at your library, you need to offer regular programming. While 3D design may seem daunting to staff, such classes need not be expert level. Instead, focus on alternating between a simple lecture format and beginner level design. An “Intro to 3D Printing,” lecture-style class can focus on teaching patrons about the technology and how it works. More specifically, you can explain to attendees how 3D printing can be used at your library, namely what your policies are, and what your equipment is capable of doing. In a design-focused class, consider using a free software option like TinkerCAD. With TinkerCAD, your only tech requirements are a computer with a current web browser and a decent internet connection. As an added bonus, there are a number of built-in tutorials for patrons to utilize that can leave them with a basic proficiency in design.

Given the current pandemic environment, in-person classes may not be an option. If this is the case, virtual 3D-printing classes can be an effective alternative. At the Patchogue-Medford Library in Suffolk County (NY), Maker-space Coordinator TabithaKirshey offers prerecorded 3D tutorials for patrons. In one program, patrons were instructed on how to design a Banned Books themed bookmark, which was then submitted through their website to be printed—an interesting cross promotion! In neighboring Nassau County, the Great Neck Library has been offering virtual classes since March. Youth Services Coordinator Adam Hinz explained how the library has expanded their offerings, making...
the pivot from prerecorded to live virtual classes via Zoom. At present, he and Emerging Technologies Librarians Christopher Van Winkler and Jamie Poland conduct an ongoing 3D Design Club for all ages. Both libraries have found TinkerCAD to be an effective option for virtual instruction.

Whether in-person or virtual, you can use the end of these classes to share marketing materials on 3D printing at your library. Provide resource lists of free design software along with any paid options the library may provide to patrons. Attendees should leave these programs with a basic understanding of the technology and the potential uses of the library’s printer(s). Done correctly, regular program offerings will have the effect of driving interest in your printers as well as raising patron proficiency to where they can create and print their own designs outside of the confines of library programs.

Get Social!
Social media is an important component of any marketing strategy, and 3D printing offers some interesting possibilities for its use. On platforms like Facebook and Instagram, video is a powerful medium, generating 1200% more shares than text and images combined. With that in mind, consider recording interesting 3D-printing jobs whenever possible. Using an iPad, you can easily livestream a print job, allowing fans of your page to drop in and monitor a job’s progress. Alternatively, you can record a time-lapse video, which can grant patrons the opportunity to view the entire creation process in thirty seconds or less. Such content is highly shareable and can quickly build patron awareness of the library’s 3D printer(s).

Conclusion
While there is certainly a wow factor to 3D printing, the novelty can quickly wear off, leaving your printer to fade into obscurity. By taking a varied and determined approach to marketing, you can ensure your library attracts a steady flow of new users, keeping your printer occupied and your patrons engaged.

Kevin is Head of Community Engagement at the Kalamazoo (MI) Public Library.

Kevin is currently reading *We Will Win the Day: The Civil Rights Movement, the Black Athlete, and the Quest for Equality* by Louis Moore.

I have always admired people who are so fed up with the status quo that it drives them to directly challenge the traditions entrenched in their professions. Ever since I started working in public libraries, I have encountered many ideas and actions that have made the innovator and leader inside of me cringe. How can a profession that literally safeguards materials that can assist patrons in the quest to become better people ignore the knowledge in the stacks that could help them become better leaders? As I now inhabit the midway point in my career, I find myself returning to concepts, ideas, and tricks that can enable one to become a better leader. These are things that may seem to buck tradition, but at their core should be the norm.

**Trust is the Key**

One of the first concepts I learned when I became a department head is that trust is the key. It is a simple idea that is the foundation to all healthy organizations. The trust I am talking about is not what Patrick Lencioni calls predictive, “if you can come to know how a person will behave in a given situation, you can trust her,” (Lencioni, p.27).

One way to think of predictive trust is, “My colleague has been emptying the dropbox every Tuesday morning for the past ten years, so I have no worries about it being emptied.” Instead, leaders need to encourage their teams to build “vulnerability-based trust,” this is what happens when teammates become completely honest and transparent with one another, (Lencioni, p.27).

If I am working out a solution with a peer, and their idea is superior to mine, genuinely saying “Wow, that idea is so much better than what I thought up,” is an example of vulnerability-based trust. If someone speaks out against a particular idea you have been working on, you will understand it is not because the person thinks you are stupid. They push back because they want the idea to be better and they know you have the same goal to make the organization better. When this kind of trust is at its highest, colleagues are not insulted or leaving meetings with hurt feelings because everyone understands that feedback need
not be critical. Framed properly, it can be truly constructive. Some of the most innovative libraries I know are very healthy organizations because they foster opportunities to build trust.

**A Leader’s Most Important Job**

When I have the opportunity to mentor a new leader, I find myself repeating the mantra “A leader’s most important job is to do whatever is possible to help members of the team succeed.” Leaders gain nothing from their direct reports struggling on the job. In fact, I contend that the mark of a poor leader is a team failing to meet the goals of the organization. You should want your direct reports to succeed with all the goals and objectives you have devised together. Almost all of my regular meetings with staff end with me asking, “Do you have what you need to succeed?” If the answer is “no,” we work up a solution to get them what is needed. Investing in the resources up front will not only result in a win for all, but will also make clear that you care about the work they are doing for the library. Everyone wants to be valued and respected for the work they do each day. Ultimately, leaders should get failing marks for not providing resources and support. They fail, you fail.

**Self-Awareness**

Many of my very first experiences as a leader were far from constructive. Trying to avoid being a “bad boss,” I dedicated hours upon hours of study on how to be a good leader. After reading all the best books, I realized I was still making many of the same mistakes. It was not until I saw what the roadblock was that I started to improve. It finally clicked that I was making some fundamental behavioral mistakes myself. Understanding what triggers your bad behavior in the library can help you make improvements. I truly believe that my breakthrough as a leader was accepting my mistakes and understanding that I had to become more self-aware to grow and develop.

**Tune In**

The ability to actively listen to one another is vital in a healthy organization. One of the best ways to build trust is to actively listen to your teammates. Listen to their ideas, concerns, hopes, and dreams. I practice active-listening as much as possible, but especially during one on one meetings. The first part of these meetings is for my direct report to talk about anything, even stuff not directly related to work. The one on one is also time in which I learn what is needed for a particular project or how I can help with an issue that needs attention. Often leaders will get caught up in their own self-importance and fail to really listen to the needs of the team. This is a destructive path, so if you are not a good listener, practice.

**Communicate**

Another statement I use regularly with my direct reports is, “I will communicate anything with you that is not private or privileged. Just ask me.” Many leaders go out of their way to hoard information and dole it out when they find it appropriate. Not only is this selfish, but the best method to keep your team chained to the status-quo. Sharing in the plans for the library’s future and encouraging staff to seek out the info they need to move forward is the recipe for an innovative and healthy library. Keeping staff well-informed builds trust, ignites innovation, encourages empowerment, and gives everyone what they need to succeed.

**Assume Best Intent**

If you find yourself crafting a movie in your brain in which your team or colleagues are planning against you, smash the film projector! Realizing that leaders should assume best intent took me many visits to a work coach and therapist to realize. Healthy organizations are filled with individuals working to elevate their institution to extraordinary levels. If leaders are practicing many of the above suggestions, then it is safe to assume that staff want to do valuable and meaningful work in alignment with the library’s strategic plans. When someone messes up, it is not because they wanted you or a teammate to fail. It is because they are human. A mistake was made and
a growth opportunity has been made available.

**Keep On Keeping On**
This example reinforces the important foundation of trust that all healthy organizations need, which in turn supports all of what I have learned above.

Being a leader is incredibly hard work. Keep learning and working on being the best you. Leadership skills do not magically appear when you are promoted from front line to front office. I still consider myself a learning leader who wants to do right for my team.

**Fare Thee Well**
I do hope these ideas will assist leaders in finding their own paths to healthy organizations. This is my last column for *Public Libraries* and I thank you for being with me as we all work towards supporting leaders in libraries.

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**Assabet Interactive Introduces New Software for Library of Things Collections**

The Library of Things software the company introduced at the PLA meeting in Nashville follows the blueprint of their line of popular, state-of-the-art modules for public library websites.

The new software delivers a professional-looking and organized display of a library’s collection to its website, employing easy methods for both patrons to review and request “things” and staff to manage the reservation and check-out/return process. Features include the delivery of a library’s terms and conditions document as part of the reservation process; the ability to assign a unique loan period to each object and establish buffers between loans for maintenance; a reporting function that captures critical statistics; and ILS library card validation against criteria established by the library. The module can also deliver any instruction manuals associated with an object.

All Assabet modules, including their event calendar, room booking, and museum pass software—integrate easily with any platform, make use of a common administration area, and include reporting tools. There are no limits on the amount of data held, so reports can go back to the beginning of a library’s subscription. Neither is there a cap on the number staff users, who are not confined to the library’s IP address when logging in. Adjusting the color and fonts of the software to more closely align with the look of a library’s website is made easy for those with CSS experience.

Assabet Interactive can provide product details and schedule a webinar demo when contacted through their website at www.assabetinteractive.com.
CITIZEN SCIENCE AND CROWDSOURCING AS TOOLS FOR ENGAGEMENT

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Tess is All of Us Community Engagement Coordinator, Network of the National Library of Medicine—Middle Atlantic Region. Tess is currently reading New Suns: Original Speculative Fiction by People of Color edited by Nisi Shawl.

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Kelsey is Academic Coordinator, Network of the National Library of Medicine—Middle Atlantic Region. Kelsey is currently reading The Ends of the World: Volcanic Apocalyps, Lethal Oceans, and Our Quest to Understand Earth’s Past Mass Extinctions by Peter Brannen.
As we consider the myriad ways public libraries can encourage civic engagement, citizen science should not be overlooked. Highly adaptable and approachable, this avenue of public-driven exploration can be an exciting method of engagement with a far-reaching tangible impact. This article examines the basics of citizen science, discusses examples of how it aligns with the goals of public libraries, and provides practical ways libraries can integrate these crowdsourced projects into their programming and community outreach.

WHAT IS CITIZEN SCIENCE?

First, what is citizen science? According to the Environmental Protection Agency, citizen science “uses the collective strength of communities and the public to identify research questions, collect and analyze data, interpret results, make new discoveries, and develop technologies and applications.”¹ In other words, global citizens unite to charge forth toward discovery! Citizen science projects are extremely diverse, so no matter your audience and your needs, there is likely a suitable project. Citizen science participants can mark observations in an app, identify animals online, or even don waterproof boots to wade through wetlands.

While the term may be new to some, citizen science has actually existed for centuries. Throughout scientific history, researchers have leveraged the power of the people to make valuable breakthroughs. Because of the hard work of amateur scientists and curious observers, longstanding projects like the Audubon Society’s Christmas Bird Count have achieved remarkable milestones and contributed to real policy change.² These types of scientific undertakings are unique in a few important ways:

1. Because capacity is increased exponentially when the workload is shared between scientists and members of the public, the pace of data collection has the potential to increase significantly.
2. These projects create a unique opportunity for hands-on education and engagement, which can result in lasting impact on participants.
3. Participation in citizen science is a chance for individual community members to engage physically with their environment, potentially strengthening their connection with local ecosystems and encouraging a more intimate relationship with the world around them.

For these reasons and many more, citizen science projects have become an increasingly popular avenue of engagement.

Because of the nature of public libraries as community hubs and conduits of knowledge, it only makes sense that citizen science and crowdsourced projects have become integral aspects of programming for many libraries. It is a natural extension of library services to offer toolkits, guides, and workshops focusing on crowdsourced initiatives.³ Further, these projects are the perfect embodiment of STEM/STEAM learning objectives, prioritizing hands-on learning and (depending on the nature of the project) digital literacy skill-building.

HOW CAN LIBRARIES PROMOTE CITIZEN SCIENCE AND CROWDSOURCING?

As one might imagine, there are countless examples of public libraries embracing citizen science projects, from standalone events to participation in long-term national partnerships. Of course, the capacity of libraries to provide extensive program-
Citizen Science and Crowdsourcing as Tools for Engagement

Engagement varies widely due to staffing, budget, location, and more. The following are a few examples of citizen science and crowdsourcing in action at the public library on a range of scales.

Citizen Science Toolkits

Recently, Arizona State University and SciStarter collaborated on a project supported by the Institute of Museum and Library Services called Libraries as Community Hubs for Citizen Science, which invited researchers, libraries, web designers, and advisors to “develop and evaluate citizen science toolkits available for and through the public library partners and . . . create associated resources to train, support, and communicate with librarians and citizen scientists.”⁴

One tangible result of this collaboration was a variety of engaging kits available for checkout from public libraries, including Mesa (AZ) Public Library.⁵ They offered patrons access to kits that included tools and equipment to assist participation in several ongoing citizen science projects, including GPS trackers, laminated field guides, air quality sensors, and lens adapters for smartphones. Libraries wishing to offer similar services can replicate these kits or develop similar ones. Virtual kits featuring digital resources and online tools instead of physical equipment are also an appealing option in the current context.

Citizen Science Month

While circulating kits might not be a feasible option for some libraries, there are plenty of examples of virtual engagement with citizen science initiatives. In April 2020, SciStarter partnered with the Network of the National Library of Medicine (NNLM) to celebrate Citizen Science Month and mark the release of The Field Guide to Citizen Science: How You Can Contribute to Scientific Research and Make a Difference (Timber Press, 2020). While SciStarter has thousands of citizen science projects listed on its website, NNLM selected a handful of health-related projects to support and promote among their network of libraries and community-based organizations. These projects aligned with NNLM’s core mission of increasing the public’s access to reliable health information. The selected projects included gamified Alzheimer’s research, litter-tracking apps, water-testing experiments, and more. Citizen Science Month culminated in a webinar that highlighted these projects, introduced attendees to NNLM, invited libraries to participate in citizen science, and featured a reading from the Field Guide’s author, Darlene Cavalier.

What began as one webinar to launch this new book evolved into much more with the help of public libraries and researchers. Following the webinar’s success, NNLM and SciStarter sought creative ways to more directly involve public libraries in citizen science. With the support of the All of Us Research Program, a webinar series was launched, building on April’s momentum to feature public library staff in conversation with some of the researchers, designers, and scientists behind these health-related citizen science projects.

In July 2020, the series kicked off with two workshops that supplemented summer reading programming at each featured library. The first webinar spotlighted Dr. Connie Walker, director of the Globe At Night research project. This project uses crowdsourcing to “raise public awareness of the impact of light pollution.”⁶ Walker was interviewed by the director of the South Butler Community Library in Saxonburg (PA) followed by a Q&A period open to all attendees. The second workshop was hosted by Tre-dyfrin Township Libraries in eastern Pennsylvania. This time, the Stall Catchers research program was featured, and a librarian interviewed the project lead, Dr. Pietro Michelucci. The series continued throughout the summer and fall, featuring public libraries from around the country and researchers eager to expound upon their crowdsourced projects. With the help of SciStarter staff, All of Us Research Project outreach coordinators, and NNLM engagement coordinators, this was a relatively low-effort undertaking for the public libraries involved, but one with a high impact and a wide reach.

Edit-a-Thons

Another crowdsourced project supported by NNLM is the biannual #CiteNLM edit-a-thon. Edit-a-thons are organized efforts to improve articles in a particu-
lar topical area on Wikipedia, and NNLM’s edit-a-thons focus on improving various health and medical articles by adding citations to trustworthy sources of health information. Edit-a-thons can focus on any topic, but are often centered on areas in which Wikipedia’s coverage is inadequate (e.g., indigenous languages or women in science). #CiteNLM edit-a-thons are month-long campaigns that can engage libraries of all types with in-person edit-a-thons as well as virtual events. Librarians are natural partners in efforts to improve Wikipedia: they value open access to accurate information, high-quality references, and collaboration. Libraries also can provide computer access, space (virtual or physical) to collaboratively edit, and knowledgeable staff to provide training and digital literacy education.

More than 300 students, faculty, and library staff across the country have joined #CiteNLM campaigns to support universal access to high-quality health information. These editors have edited more than 500 health articles, which have accumulated 10 million views. The current #CiteNLM campaign structure makes it easy for either individuals or groups to contribute or host affiliated events, and Wikipedia editing, like citizen science projects can be incorporated into a wide range of preexisting programming surrounding numerous topics and reaching diverse audiences. Editing also contributes to the development of information and digital literacy skills.

Since training is provided at the start of each editing campaign, even novice editors can feel comfortable joining in. Libraries can, with little effort, participate in these events, either by actively joining as an organized group, or by simply promoting the edit-a-thons and encouraging patrons to take part. Independent Wikipedia edit-a-thons can be a somewhat labor-intensive crowdsourcing program for public libraries to host due to the need to provide training and actively facilitate the event. However, NNLM provides plenty of resources to make the process easy and painless for libraries to host #CiteNLM-affiliated events. For instance, NNLM’s edit-a-thon Organizer’s Guide provides ample guidance for hosting events, and NNLM staff provide training sessions, videos, and periodically teach a four-week asynchronous course on “Wikipedia + Libraries.” WebJunction’s “Wikipedia and Libraries” page also includes a training curriculum and a number of helpful articles.

Libraries are natural facilitators for crowdsourced projects like Wikipedia edit-a-thons, which can bring substantial engagement and complement existing programming.

WHERE SHOULD I START?

For public libraries hoping to incorporate crowdsourcing and citizen science projects into their programming, there are many options for entry points and commitment levels. The following selection of resources, tools, and approaches might prove helpful for those libraries.

**Contact your regional NNLM office.** NNLM is divided into regional offices serving their respective states. You can find your region’s contact information on the NNLM website (https://nnlm.gov) and your library can join the network for free. Once connected to your regional office, you will have access to funding opportunities and resources that will undoubtedly be useful as you explore citizen science and crowdsourcing projects. The free guide to hosting a #CiteNLM edit-a-thon is also available on the website, as well as training videos, links to citizen science projects, and more. NNLM staff are always willing to think creatively about potential programming with partner institutions.

**Check out SciStarter’s Project Finder.** This searchable database (https://scistarter.org/finder) is full of thousands of active projects for you to participate in. Ranging in engagement levels and research goals, there is certainly a project to fit your library. There is even a search bar that specifically lets users look for projects they can do over a lunch break, at a sports stadium, or exclusively online.

**Explore tiny worlds with Foldscope.** Founded on the principle of increasing access to scientific tools, this company creates and sells paper microscopes, which are easy to use and store. They sell classroom sets and teacher’s kits (www.foldscope.com). Relatively low in cost, each purchase helps
fund the shipment of Foldscopes to countries with limited access to scientific instruments. There is a growing global community of Foldscope users, making it exciting to both discover others’ observations and share your own. Exploration is just a fold away!

**Organize your own Wikipedia edit-a-thon.** This is a wonderful way to introduce crowdsourcing into your library’s programming slate. Edit-a-thons can be entirely virtual and need not be restricted to a specific timeframe. There are several free guides available, including one from Wikipedia itself (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:How_to_run_an_edit-a-thon).

**Involve local conservation organizations.** Local watershed associations, nature conservancies, parks departments, and tree tenders can be invaluable resources for citizen scientists. Staff might be willing to serve as guest experts on a webinar, or might have suggestions for participation in projects.

**Engage your community in citizen science games and friendly competitions.** Some libraries have chosen to take advantage of the gamified nature of certain projects (e.g., Stall Catchers, an Alzheimer’s research project) to spark interest in their communities. Posing a friendly competition between branches from the same system or between age groups can be an exciting supplement to summer reading programming and a great STEM project for families to enjoy together. Stall Catchers (https://stallcatchers.com/main) even has a points system, which is further motivation for participants.

**Use the (free, digital) Librarian’s Guide to Citizen Science!** A product of the SciStarter and Arizona State University partnership, this resource (https://s3-us-west-2.amazonaws.com/orrery-media/misc/CitSci_Librarians_Guide_02_22_r1.pdf) was designed with library staff in mind. Full of replicable examples and reputable resources, this is a perfect guide for beginners and a useful tool for those with experience.

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“Be Like RBG: Lessons from a Life” by Suzanne LaPierre  
**POSTED SEPTEMBER 28, 2020**

Like countless others, I admired the Honorable Ruth Bader Ginsburg (RBG), Supreme Court Justice and human rights icon. In 2017 I painted her portrait as part of a series on human rights leaders. I had a quality art print made from the original and mailed it with a letter of appreciation. To my delight, I received a handwritten thank you note on Supreme Court stationary—written a day before her 85th birthday. The Justice referred to my description of her demeanor in the portrait as “bold and determined.” [Read more at http://publiclibrariesonline.org/2020/09/be-like-rbg-lessons-from-a-life.](http://publiclibrariesonline.org/2020/09/be-like-rbg-lessons-from-a-life.)
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Learning From Our Statistics

12 Simple Rules for Understanding and Using Our Numbers Better

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Mary Jo is currently reading Adventures in Risky Play: What is Your Yes? by Rusty Keeler.
To utilize statistics effectively, librarians need to have an understanding of the underlying principles. An oft-neglected area of study in librarianship, statistical fundamentals are approached here in a simple rules format with examples. The purpose is to help librarians gather and use statistical information in new and better ways. This is of particular concern at this point in time when traditional library statistics like circulation and visitation are dropping nationwide due in part to the proliferation of convenient digital information sources.

Libraries are great at counting things. We count visits, user registrations, circulation, collection size, number of programs, attendance at programs, computer and Wi-Fi uses, website visits, and questions asked. We survey our communities to learn more about their needs and the impact of our services, and we tally their responses. And under pandemic conditions, we are counting all sorts of new things: reserves placed, curbside attendance, Zoom attendance, recorded program views, craft kits supplied, and newsletters opened.

Collectively, these numbers may contribute to persuasive infographics and annual reports demonstrating library usage to our communities, Boards, and funding agencies. This is important, since we are the recipients and stewards of public funds to be used for the greater good. However, as statistics in traditional areas like circulation and visitation drop nationwide in the wake of the proliferation of convenient digital formats and pandemic-enforced closures, this is a good time to look more closely at statistics to see what we can learn.

Statistics demonstrate how our communities are using our resources to help us make good decisions about what to do next. These numbers are an important part of our library’s story, telling us what’s being used, what’s changing, what’s working, and what could maybe work better. When we make changes, the numbers before and after can tell us if we are moving in the right direction.

But statistics are often misused. They are sometimes treated as a scorecard where higher means better, encouraging library staff to focus on increasing numbers instead of on meeting needs. We misread data and draw incorrect conclusions. We make bad comparisons, look for trends with insufficient data, and miss connections. We count what is easy to count, and we don’t necessarily count what is important to know. Some of the most important information is simply not countable, and it may get ignored. We take surveys and allow the opinions of a few to stand for the majority.

For people who don’t love math, or who were never drawn to study it, using statistics to evaluate library services can be a bit perplexing. To be used effectively, we need to understand their limitations and best uses. Twelve simple rules can help us think about statistics more holistically and strategically.

1. UNDERSTAND WHAT YOU ARE MEASURING WHEN YOU COUNT
Counting only measures one thing, so we really need to understand what we are measuring when we count. Our door counter tells us how many people passed in front of the device during a particular time span, and that is all. It does not tell us why they came, how long they stayed, how often they visit, or whether they found what they were looking for during their visit. It includes people who came and went multiple times, staff members and working volunteers, visitors from outside our population base, and people just avoiding bad weather.

Our circulation statistics tell us how many items were checked out or renewed. They don’t tell us if...
books were useful or even read. They don’t tell us if a renewal was due to continued use or the inconvenience of an earlier return. And with the advent of autorenewals, these numbers tell us even less as we preemptively renew items ourselves, lumping potential overdue items in with actual requested renewals.

*Tip:* The numbers we collect are points of information, which when combined with other information, can help us make informed decisions. On their own, they are not a measure of whether or not we are meeting our mission or creating an impact. On their own, they tell us very little. Collected over time, they can help us see trends and tell a story.

*Tip:* Whenever you create a statistical report, it is good practice to include a legend of exactly what was counted. Stating exactly what you are measuring will help you avoid drawing unwarranted conclusions. It may help you rethink how you are counting to see if there is a better way.

### POPULATION
Legal population of service area; Census Bureau estimates of growth since 2010.

### COMPUTER USAGE
Number of times someone logged into a public computer for a one-hour session.

### CURBSIDE PICK UP
Number of times materials were delivered to a waiting automobile.

### 2. THE MORE ACCURATE THE NUMBERS YOU COLLECT, THE BETTER CONCLUSIONS YOU CAN DRAW
Math is a precise science. When you apply math to estimated numbers, your accuracy decreases with each operation. This affects sums and differences, averages, percentages, services per capita, and turnover rates. The more you estimate, the less useful your statistics are for the purposes of evaluation.

*Tip:* When at all possible, count instead of estimate. If you need to estimate, employ counting as much as possible in the process. Count the attendees in a quarter of the room and multiply by four or count reference questions for one week each quarter and extrapolate to fifty-two weeks.

*Tip:* Be consistent with your counting. If you are running a report in your library software to get circulation data, make sure you are using the exact same parameters every time. If you are counting reference questions several weeks each year, try to do it the same weeks each year when activity levels will be similar.

*Tip:* If you think Census Bureau estimates since the last official count are incorrect for your population, check to see how student enrollment is changing in the local school district, which counts students every year, to get a better idea of how your population has changed.

### 3. BEWARE OF DRAWING CONCLUSIONS FROM SMALL OR OVERLAPPING DATA SETS
If you have three people at your technology program one week and four the following week, you could claim an increase of 33%. From a statistical standpoint, though, this data set is too small to produce reliable data. The chance that the increase would be replicated or even maintained week after week is statistically small, so using this data to make decisions about what to do next would be ill-advised.

If you had 30 people at Monday’s storytime and 45 at Tuesday’s, you could claim that 75 people came to storytime, when in reality some people may have come to both. The decisions you make about storytime schedules may affect way fewer people than your totals would have you believe.

*Tip:* Increase the size of your data set by aggregating it across multiple instances. Compare one year of attendance with another instead of one month to the next. Compare all of your technology program attendance collectively instead of by individual program from month to month.

*Tip:* When you have overlapping data sets, it is especially important to use accurate language. You are counting how many people attended storytime on a given date, not how many different people came to your storytimes.

### 4. AVERAGES CAN BE MISLEADING
If your legal population size is 25,000 and your annual book circulation is 500,000, it would be
tempting to say that on average, your community members read twenty books per year. You might picture this whole community of people, each with a stack of twenty books. And you would likely be picturing no actual person in your community. Why? Because circulation includes renewals, because checkouts do not necessarily mean books were read, and because many of your community members checked out one or zero books, while a few voracious readers borrowed ten items a week.

That same circulation data set might have a median of four (number of checkouts ranked lowest to highest has a middle value of four). This median is closer to the typical behavior of your community, but it still misses the point that every member of your community is unique.

*Tip:* You are planning services for a diverse community, so thinking about the average user may narrow your thinking about their needs.³

*Tip:* Using the median instead of the average can help reduce the effect of outliers. For example, the average program attendance may be skewed by your summer reading kickoff attendance of 1,000 people when other programs are in the five to 25 attendance range.

*Tip:* When tracking attendance numbers, the average number of people who come to a weekly program is less useful for space planning than knowing the minimum and maximum.

5. **STATISTICS ARE INTERRELATED**

Libraries serve their communities in multifaceted and increasingly complex ways, and state agencies each year add more fields to the data they want us to collect. Where we once counted computer uses, we now also collect Wi-Fi uses. Where we once counted programs, we now count children’s, teen, and adult programs separately.

What we notice as we measure more aspects of service is that a policy change or a change in the local environment may increase one statistic while making another statistic drop. For example, as your e-book collection use grows, people can check out from home, and your library visitation and physical collection circulation may drop. As readers’ advisory aids are integrated in your catalog, questions at the desk may decline. The more accessible your databases are through your website, the less demand there should be for reference help. The more intuitive your collection layout and signage is, the less people should need help finding things.

*Tip:* When you improve services, be prepared to find new ways to count, even ways that the state doesn’t recognize yet. Leaving an e-resources consortium to create a stand-alone collection may result in a smaller collection but it may also reduce wait times and eventually increase usage.

*Tip:* When a statistic trends upward or downward, look for changes in other statistics that may be systemically related.

6. **STOP CHASING STATISTICS (MORE IS NOT NECESSARILY BETTER)**

When circulation drops, we may be tempted to rearrange the collection, add display shelves, create additional signage, weed, buy newer materials, and increase the number of shelves since materials are crowded when fewer things are being checked out.

Any one of these strategies might make the collection more attractive and might invite more usage, which would be a good thing. However, sometimes a decrease in statistics means there has been a reduction in community need for that service. If the demand for health books has dropped because information in databases and the internet is easier to navigate and more current, then trying to increase the circulation of the physical collection will be a waste of time and money and will not serve the community.

*Tip:* Whenever a statistical measure drops, think about your goals for the community first. Your community doesn’t care whether your collection circulates 100,000 times or 200,000 times. They care whether they can find the information they need in a format and timeframe convenient to them.

*Tip:* When circulation drops, your shelves get more crowded. The answer to these crowded shelves is *not* adding more shelves. The answer is weeding and curating better. You may also need to reduce shelving to create space for something the community needs more!
**Tip:** Digital circulation may never make up for losses in physical collection circulation. Many digital resources are easily accessible and reasonably inexpensive for patrons to access on their own, while the same resources are expensive or unavailable for libraries, subject to licensing expiration, and circulated sequentially with wait times. Where libraries could enthusiastically recommend that patrons check out physical materials, we are more cautious with digital resources that diminish in availability with each additional circulation. A digital collection operates differently than a physical collection, and we will need to think about new ways to measure the effectiveness of these collections.

**7. DON’T LOOK TOO OFTEN**

We count and record every day, and we tally every month. But if we look that often for meaning, we give disproportionate attention to detail because there is so much of it. In statistics, we are said to be experiencing a high ratio of noise (data we should not be paying attention to) to signal (the important pieces of information we should be paying attention to). The greatest strength of statistics gathering is the view it gives us of trends over time. If you look at too short an interval of time, you may overestimate the significance of apparent changes. If you look at too long an interval of time, you may be comparing a library in the throes of a digital revolution with a library that relied on now-declining formats like CDs and DVDs for a large portion of its circulation.

**Tip:** In monthly reports to the Board, putting comparative data in a table may suggest that it is more important than it is. Numbers have the aura of indisputable facts, after all. Skip the comparison and report the month’s total in narrative form, simply telling of this month’s activity. Add tables periodically to focus attention on particular shifts in usage that you want to explore with the Board.

**Tip:** Sometimes you need to take the longest possible view by comparing your trends to the trends of libraries in general and libraries of similar size and demography. If everyone’s circulation is dropping, it may not be anything you are doing or not doing that is causing the change.

**8. COMPARE WITH CAUTION**

It’s tempting when the state or national statistics are released each year to start comparing our libraries to others. In almost every case, we will be comparing apples to oranges. While public libraries may have similar missions, the communities we serve are unique. We have differences in building sizes, revenue levels, governance, population density, area served, diversity, education levels, local economies, public transportation, etc., all of which may affect our statistics.

We also collect our statistics differently than each other. A library’s legal service population may be very different than the actual population being served. Libraries count circulation and computer uses using different parameters within the limits of their library software and policies. What is recorded as a reference question varies from library to library and even employee to employee.

**Tip:** If you peruse the IMLS or your state’s annual library data, filter the data for libraries with a population within about 10% of yours and expenditure within about 10% of yours, aiming for a benchmark set of at least ten libraries and at most about 200. Then compare their usage trends over time with yours. If a library stands out as similar to yours or particularly high-performing, you might inspect their website to see if there is anything you can learn that might be useful.

**9. BEWARE OF UNWARRANTED CONCLUSIONS**

If thirty people come to storytime on Mondays and half that come on Tuesdays, you might think that your Tuesday storytime leader needs improvement. In actuality, it may be that your parking lot is too full on Tuesdays, your Tuesday storytime is too close to lunch, or the church down the street has a competing program on Tuesdays. It could be that the kids that typically come on Tuesdays are aging out of storytime, and it may be that the smaller size group is just perfect for this group of children.

**Tip:** When a statistic seems to point to an issue, look for all possible causes. Consider that there may be multiple causes, random interference, or no cause
at all. Consider that it might not even be a problem.

Tip: When looking at differences in statistics, consider data from other sources that might lend an explanation or offer insight.

10. SURVEY FOR STORIES
The surveys we do are almost always statistically insufficient. For a survey to be statistically useful, you need well-designed questions asked of a random sampling of people in a number significant to the whole of the population. There are online calculators to help you determine your sample size; for a population of 25,000 you would need about 1,000 respondents to be 95% assured of a 3% margin of error. That may sound like gobbledygook, but the point here is that you need a large sampling of respondents to reach any sort of reliable conclusions, statistically speaking.

The surveys libraries typically do provide anecdotal information which still may be helpful. If you send out a survey and get 160 responses from your population of 25,000 people, you don’t have the numbers for statistical accuracy. If fifty of those people tell you that your late fees are too high, this may be worth paying attention to. If one person tells you that the electrical outlet in your study area is causing a shock, that is really good to know, despite the lack of statistical relevance.

Tip: Use surveys to gather anecdotal information. Look for common themes in the stories you are hearing. Don’t over-value tallied results.

Tip: Use surveys to share information as well. When you provide a list of services asking people to check which ones they use, you are simultaneously informing them of those services.

11. PERIODICALLY TAKE A DEEP DIVE ON SOME OF YOUR STATISTICS
Go below the surface by counting more than the state asks you to in order to learn other things. When you are counting reference questions, create a table to tally research, technology, readers’ advisory, and other questions separately. Total your questions answered by hour and day of the week. Learning what percentage of your questions come from different categories and knowing when you get the most questions may help you with staffing and training decisions.

You can track first circulation separately from renewals. You can track circulation by area of the collection or new items separately from existing items. On reference count week, you might also ask staff to track hours spent on other tasks to help determine the cost of an ILL, fees to charge for processing on lost materials, or the amount of time to allot for program preparation.

Tip: As part of your strategic planning process, look at the trends over three to five years in every count available to you to paint as complete a picture of operations as you can. A membership review, for example, might include the percentage of your community that has library cards, the percentage of your users that live within your service area, the percentage of your accounts that have checked out a physical item in the year, the number of new and expiring members each year, and of course, the trends in those areas.

Tip: Whenever you are making a change, take measurements before and then measure again at six months and a year to see what affect the change had.

12. IF YOU ARE MAKING OPERATIONAL DECISIONS, ASK YOURSELF HOW NUMBERS MIGHT HELP
Trying to decide whether to add autorenewal? A table that compares first circulation, renewals, and reserves over time will help you calculate how many autorenewals (renewals of un-reserved items that weren’t already being renewed) your library is likely to process as a percentage of your circulation. It’s an imperfect number, but at our library, we would expect about a 20–25% increase in overall circulation count, allowing for one autorenewal for each item. This is one piece of information to help us make this decision.

Tip: Try calculating cost per circulation for different parts of your collection. Divide annual expense by annual circulation/use for your physical collection, e-books, e-magazines, streamed videos, and each database. This may help you with collec-
tion expenditure allocation decisions, keeping in mind that physical collections require much greater staff time than digital collections.

Tip: When preparing for a renovation, try head count studies. Divide your current facility into functional regions and have staff count the users in each area every half hour for a week, then repeat a couple more times at different seasons. Look for patterns in how your spaces are being used at different times of the day and days of the week to help you decide what kinds of spaces you may need.

Tip: Learn Excel and practice. Your library probably offers an online resource to help you learn it if you haven’t already. A few easy formulas can be so helpful for comparing data and spotting anomalies.

CONCLUSION
Libraries that underutilize statistics are missing out on a valuable tool for informed decision-making. Understanding the logic behind statistics gathering can lead to the intentional collection of specific data to aid in the evaluation of services and resources. This is critical as we focus on building digital collections, developing our spaces for multiple uses, developing programs to provide for changing community information needs, and providing essential services during an epidemic.

Just as critical, though, is to realize that our statistics measure usage rather than performance. Twentieth century management theory, born on the factory floor, taught us to count tasks completed per time period and to set related goals to improve efficiency, but libraries are not factories and efficiency is rarely our goal. Our focus should be on service, meeting community needs, and building relationships, delivered in a sustainable way, and the statistics we gather should help us better understand how we are meeting those goals.

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING


Did you know that you can enroll in Medicaid anytime of the year?

Medicaid programs cover 1 in 5 Americans.

In all states, Medicaid provides coverage for some low-income people, families and children, pregnant women, the elderly, and people with disabilities.

If you qualify, you can enroll immediately.

Visit healthcare.gov/screener to learn more.
Did you know that you can enroll in Medicaid and CHIP anytime of the year?

1 out of 3 children have health coverage through Medicaid or the Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP).

Medicaid and CHIP provide free or low-cost health coverage to millions of Americans, including some low-income people, families and children, pregnant women, the elderly, and people with disabilities.

If you qualify, you can enroll immediately.

Visit [healthcare.gov/screener](http://healthcare.gov/screener) to learn more.
Don’t wait!
Sign up for a 2021 health insurance plan.
Open Enrollment is November 1–December 15, 2020.

Enroll online.

Enroll by phone.
Call the Marketplace Call Center at 1-800-318-2596 (TTY 1-855-889-4325) for free help in your language.

Want in-person help?
To schedule free, in-person help near you, visit localhelp.healthcare.gov
Open Enrollment is on! Nov. 1–Dec. 15

Sign up for a 2021 health insurance plan on the Health Insurance Marketplace.

Good news!

- Most people who enroll on the Health Insurance Marketplace at HealthCare.gov get help paying for their health insurance.
- Many people will pay $100 or less each month.
- Plans and pricing change every year, so be sure to shop around on the Marketplace. You may find a plan that better meets your needs and budget.

Sign up on the Marketplace* Nov. 1–Dec. 15, 2020

Enroll in 1 of 3 ways:

Online.
- Visit www.healthcare.gov
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By phone.
- Call the Marketplace Call Center at 1-800-318-2596
- (TTY 1-855-889-4325) for free help in your language

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- Visit: localhelp.healthcare.gov

*For states utilizing the federally facilitated marketplace
Many life changes can qualify you to sign up for insurance in a **Special Enrollment Period**.

Learn more at HealthCare.gov!
What is a Special Enrollment Period?

A Special Enrollment Period is a time, other than Open Enrollment, when you can sign up for health insurance through HealthCare.gov. You only get a Special Enrollment Period if you lose your insurance or experience a major life change.

- If you lose your insurance, such as through a work lay-off or turning 26 and aging off your parent’s plan, you have 60 days before or after your coverage ends to enroll on HealthCare.gov.
- If you experience a major life change, you have 60 days after the event to enroll in a health plan.

Which major life changes qualify?

Some of the most common life changes are:

- Moving to a new zip code or county
- Getting married or divorced
- Having a baby, adopting or becoming a foster parent
- Becoming a U.S. citizen or getting a green card

How do you apply for a Special Enrollment Period?

Visit HealthCare.gov and follow instructions to see if you can enroll for 2021 coverage. Or, call HealthCare.gov at 1-800-318-2596. (TTY 1-855-889-4325).
2021 EARLY LITERACY ACTIVITIES CALENDAR—AVAILABLE NOW!

Includes book lists, nursery rhymes, song lyrics, craft ideas, and more!

Based on the Every Child Ready to Read® practices of reading, writing, singing, talking, playing, (+counting), the PLA Early Literacy Calendar contains activities for every day of the year.

Get more information or purchase at https://www.alastore.ala.org/PLA2021calendar
Education in young children is often seen as a relationship between the learner and their parents, and the learner and their teacher. However, prominent child development theorists suggest that the place where children learn can be considered a third “teacher”—this place nurtures and provokes the curiosity of young children and sparks play and learning. Public libraries, if designed in such a way, are well-positioned to address this need, creating lifelong relationships with children and their caregivers and providing children with opportunities to help them grow and develop.

OLDENBURG’S THIRD SPACE

In *The Great Good Place*, Ray Oldenburg posited that to be emotionally healthy, every person needs three spaces: the home, the workplace, and a third space where people voluntarily come together, not for one specific purpose, but for a variety of purposes that interest them individually. Third spaces are anchors of community life, facilitating and fostering broadly creative interactions. It is in these spaces where communities are built. Third spaces allow individuals to relax in public, providing them with opportunities to encounter familiar faces and make new acquaintances.

Public libraries, based on Oldenburg’s definition, are an obvious third space. However, not all individuals who visit the space have the same interests and needs, hence the challenge of libraries and the incredible value they bring to the public when they are well-designed and able to serve the diverse needs of their customers. Children present a very specific subset of the public library’s customer base. They have unique needs compared with adults. For example, children are always learning, so one cannot separate leisure from learning in children’s spaces. For children, the third space needs to be a place where they can play and express themselves,
free of prejudice, where no one group is prioritized over another—a place where each child has agency.

Therefore, in the context of children’s spaces, public libraries need to use great care to design children’s libraries specifically for children; but how? In short: public libraries can look beyond their four walls to find guidance and inspiration. Reggio Emilia is a widely known and well-respected educational method focused on preschool and primary education. Its principles, while rooted in the classroom, can help guide public libraries as they design third spaces that balance play and learning.

**REGGIO EMILIA: AN OVERVIEW**
The Reggio Emilia Learning Method offers a similar viewpoint to Oldenburg’s third space theory in that it takes careful note of the space as an important factor in community building. Specifically, this educational approach considers the physical space as a partner in children’s learning. Founder Loris Malaguzzi described the space where children learn as the “third teacher.” Overall, Reggio Emilia spaces are rich learning environments designed to be both aesthetically and intellectually stimulating, while also respecting the rights, interests, and needs of the individuals who use the space. Reggio Emilia teachers want children to make friends and parents to feel welcome. Reggio Emilia teachers prioritize advocacy, such that anyone who enters an environment for young children will recognize that something of importance and value is taking place.²

There is a congruence between Oldenburg’s third space theory and the concept of space being the third teacher. Both ideas address how the design and content of the space make its occupants feel and act.

**REGGIO EMILIA DESIGN ELEMENTS**
Reggio Emilia spaces are distinctive as they build upon specific design elements that give them a unique look. One motif is the use of reflective surfaces, encouraging children to see themselves engaged in activity. Natural elements are repeated throughout, while plants and tree branches bring the serenity of the forest indoors. The careful placement of illumination focuses children’s attention on a specific task or an item, such as a light table or by spotlighting interesting objects. Aesthetically, wooden accents and subtle references to the local topography help nurture a sense of rootedness and calm. The inside environment of a Reggio space is designed for self-guided, hands-on play and exploration, with thoughtfully displayed objects and activities that subtly entice children’s ingenuity. Elements such as furniture and storage are flexible and can be moved around to adapt to the needs of customers and staff alike. Children explore these carefully curated spaces independently, leading with their thoughts, feelings, and questions. In being able to choose where they want to focus their attention, children begin to understand themselves.³

In addition to these core design elements, there are four key Reggio Emilia principles that public libraries can leverage in designing their own spaces for children: agency, equalization, play, and making learning visible. The end result is a space reflecting Reggio’s powerful image of the child as being “rich in potential, strong, powerful, competent, and most of all, connected to adults and other children.”⁴

**The Importance of Agency**
Children’s developing independence is a priority in both third spaces and Reggio Emilia spaces. In *Haircuts by Children and Other Evidence for a New Social Contract*, Darren O’Donnell explores the relationship between children and the performance arts company, Mammalian Diving Reflex, through the tenets of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.⁵ The company’s commitment to children’s freedom of expression means that they refrain from telling children how to behave. Instead, they inform children how their behavior is affecting others and allow them the opportunity to take responsibility for their actions. This respect towards children demonstrates the company’s belief that children are valued collaborators with much to contribute.

Ontario Reggio Association President Karyn Callaghan describes children as able communicators, collaborators, and meaning makers who are forming relationships every day with people and materials. Callaghan states that children are “capable of empa-
thy, whimsy, sensitivity, and joy” and the spaces they inhabit should reflect this through “thoughtfully organized, aesthetically rich, open-ended materials that invite children to communicate their ideas in many ways.” As democratic organizations that listen to their customers, can libraries strive for this level of commitment to their youngest customers?

Public libraries, like other playful spaces, are designed to balance safety and creative exploration. Children’s areas are often closed off from the greater library, providing freedom for younger children to explore on their own—even babies can show agency because the space is designed for their specific needs. They can safely move from one activity to another: crawl to a bookcase and choose a book, pull themselves up to a window, or sit safely in an area designed just for “me.” For parents, this careful design creates a sense of comfort and familiarity which initiates a lifelong connection to the library beginning with their child’s infancy, the time where most library customers are offered their first library card.

At the library, young children can choose which activities to pursue, from reading books to playing online games with friends. When presented with interactions designed for their level of development, young children can attain a feeling of mastery and empowerment. Over time, they gradually learn library norms and develop their own skills as library users. This, in turn, makes parents feel even more comfortable and satisfied with allowing their children to express their growing independence at the library. Older school-age children may choose to go to the library after school instead of going home alone. For most parents, it offers peace of mind to know that their children may be finishing their homework in a safe, fun, and trusted environment. Here again, the expression of the library as a third space. In Alberta, Canada, for example, one out of every six children experiences poverty. Preschool education is not publicly funded and therefore inaccessible to many families, despite the proven benefits to children, families, and greater society. In Enriching Children, Enriching the Nation, economist Robert G. Lynch found that all children, regardless of their socioeconomic background, benefit from high quality preschool programs. Children who attend these programs require less special education and are less likely to repeat a grade or need child welfare services. As adults, their incomes are higher and they are less likely to engage in criminal activity, thereby reducing criminality in society overall. By offering high quality early literacy programs to preschoolers for free, public libraries increase their value as third spaces for children, particularly relative to other third spaces in the community that vie for children’s time and attention and often charge an entrance fee, such as parks and museums.

The Importance of Play

Play allows children to take initiative, to test their physical and mental limits and to explore relationships of power and questions about the world around them. Play is so incredibly important for children that the United Nations lists it as one of the basic rights of every child. Through play, children use words and symbols to transform the world around
them. They create worlds where they can act out scenarios with control over conflict and its resolution. There are innumerable types of play that children engage in and express themselves through; these expressions are often described in Reggio Emilia as the “hundred languages of children.” Children need to be presented with a broad variety of play experiences that challenge them and provide comfort. If children’s areas are intentionally designed and equipped to encourage play, exploration, and socialization by children at different ages, stages, and abilities, the early learning benefits and potential as a third space multiply. Children’s libraries provide children with the opportunity to interact with, and observe other children playing with, high quality toys, puzzles, games, and technology—many of which they may not have at home. The learning that occurs through play is critical to children’s development. One way to elevate its importance is to demonstrate (to children, their families, and other customers) the result of children’s play through careful observation and annotation in the form of documentation.

The Importance of Making Learning Visible

In the Reggio Emilia method, children’s families and their home life are extremely important. Photographic reference to children’s families are used in both the design of a space and the programming that animates it. Families see themselves represented in the space because their own images are the ones adorning the walls. Reggio Emilia method describes “making learning visible” as a process that involves taking photographs of children’s work or play, annotating them, and showcasing them throughout the space. The displays can include children’s creations, photographs from projects, and examples of dialogue. These convey to the children that their efforts, intentions, and ideas are taken seriously. This method of documentation can be used in children’s libraries to communicate how children and their families are included, regarded, and respected. It also allows children to reflect on their own work and on the work of other children. Documentation of process is still a novel concept in libraries and may appear time-consuming at first. However, the examination of work in the different stages of progress reveals a child’s growing understanding of themselves, an understanding of a subject, and showcases library staff’s understanding of children’s learning through play. Furthermore, this practice celebrates learning and play and demonstrates that the library is invested in and respects children’s abilities and achievement.

BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER

Children’s library spaces should embody the above principles in order to exemplify third spaces for children. Third spaces are foundations of healthy and thriving communities. Third spaces are a venue for all community members to come alive and express themselves without judgment. For children, it is in this space where they can develop a sense of self, where not one child is more important than the next. Here, all children have equal access to play, resources, and information. Through careful design elements, many of which can be borrowed from the Reggio Emilia method, libraries can ensure that their spaces are primed to meet the needs of even their youngest customers. Unlike other third spaces for adults, the embodiment of the space as a theatre for both play and learning is extremely important because it is through play that children connect with learning. Play comes in many different forms.
and children will need challenging, playful, and relaxing spaces in which to test out their ideas about the world. Spaces can be inspiring and promote relationships among children and between families. The careful, quiet observation of children’s play and learning can be showcased to not only make visible the process of learning, but also showcase the respect and care that the library holds for children. Through documentation, customers without children can begin to understand why play is important and broaden their view of children as valuable community members. The public library can be that third space for children and families if it can build a strong, ongoing relationship with the child—one that is oriented around purposeful design of the physical space. Through careful curation, the space itself will explain to children and families how the organization regards them.

**EDMONTON PUBLIC LIBRARY**

Based in Alberta, Canada, the Edmonton Public Library (EPL) is a library system with 21 branches serving a city of almost one million residents. Although EPL hasn’t formally adopted the Reggio Emilia method in the redesign and evaluation of new and existing children’s spaces, its principles have been useful in framing an approach to these changes—one that carefully considers the library’s relationship with children, their families, and library staff, while also acknowledging the powerful learning potential of the physical space. Through careful curation, the space itself will explain to children and families how the organization regards them.

Opened in September 2020, the flagship Shelley Milner Children’s Library at the revitalized Stanley A. Milner Library downtown branch has been designed from the ground up with these principles in mind. The physical space, in many ways, mirrors a Reggio Emilia classroom with subtle references to nature and the local topography and playful elements to inspire and challenge children. There is a separate space for babies and toddlers, filled with age-appropriate, playful elements, including soft blocks to climb and a crawling obstacle course resembling the rolling foothills and tall grasses of the prairies that surround the city. Here, children exercise their sensory skills and practice physical literacy. For older children, a tactile map of the city made by The Burgeon Group enables them to physically plot out their journey to the library. Bright, colorful feature walls encourage children to engage in the available learning opportunities, from cause-and-effect activities to matching games and sensory experiences, including motion sensors that activate lighting and storm sounds from the clouds above. Loose parts are intentionally set out on tables, designed as provocations to spark curiosity, creativity, and to practice fine motor skills.

Overall, the Shelley Milner Children’s Library provides opportunities for children to develop important twenty-first century skills without even realizing it. Interactives and loose parts play foster skills in critical thinking and more often than not, collaboration. Children’s conversations with caregivers and staff about their experiences and discoveries help them develop speech and language skills. By combining learning with play, the new children’s library will be an important community hub where Edmonton families can learn, connect, and grow for years to come.

Other EPL branches are experiencing meaningful changes as well. The concept of children as experts in their own learning and preferences is showcased in the Kid Picks program, which calls for children to promote books and other materials they enjoy to other children. Library staff regularly collaborate with children in a prototyping process that applies design thinking to the implementation of interactive activities during their development. For example, the development of a game used to teach basic words in Cree, an Indigenous language, involved observations and conversations with children in the space. EPL also avoids restricting behaviors in children, instead introducing elements within the environment to guide actions. For example, EPL needs to have adequate acoustic treatments and directional speakers in branches because children gather in large groups around sound exhibits and gaming computers. This way, these popular activities that will inspire and delight young customers in joyful collaboration can be controlled within the environment, rather than by restricting behavior.
Like many public libraries, EPL offers a variety of free early literacy classes for parents and young children from 0-5 years old to help fill the need for early literacy programming. These classes advance the third space relationship between children and the library. During classes, the importance of early literacy is continually reinforced while parents learn tools they can practice at home. Library staff are available to help and offer suggestions based on careful research, but ultimately promote parents as the child’s first and best teacher. The classes allow parents to socialize, to take part in a routine, but also to take a break. Over time, children’s independence flourish as they continue to participate in classes.

EPL has also started experimenting with documentation alongside loose parts play. For example, a dress form mannequin was brought into one of the children’s areas to be adorned with a variety of fabrics by the children. The activity was so popular that it has since been recreated at other library locations. What was once seen as a space of potential disorder is now considered a thoughtful, creative space for exploration. Library staff, hesitant at first, have used the perspective of documentation of process to expand their concept of children’s learning through play. Several branches have also developed scavenger hunt activities, encouraging children to explore areas of the library beyond the children’s area. This helps them feel comfortable throughout the library and gives them the confidence to access resources in other areas. Furthermore, children have a chance to develop a relationship with staff in spaces outside the children’s area, as well as with other adult customers.

As EPL’s experience has shown, public libraries have immense potential to serve as a third space for their customers. Moreover, libraries should intentionally strive to fill this role—especially in the context of children’s libraries. If children perceive the library as a welcoming space for themselves and their families, where they are treated equally; if it is clear the library is set up to meet their needs, interests, and abilities, and they are given permission to freely explore and contribute to the space; if it is conveyed, through stated and unstated means, that they are valued and considered capable; if all of these are true, then these children are more likely to develop a strong and lasting relationship with the library and enjoy a lifetime of learning. The incredible value that a library can bring to a child’s life further cements its position as a vital physical space in any community.

REFERENCES

PL ONLINE IS SEEKING CONTRIBUTORS

Contributors produce at least one 800-word library-related post per month. Interested? Send an email to publiclibrariesonline@gmail.com.

Be sure to include a bit about your library and writing background and topics you might be interested in writing about. Our site targets the library world so preference is given to those who are in (or retired from) the field.

www.publiclibrariesonline.org
When I started working in libraries in the mid-eighties, my understanding of civic engagement was that the branch manager went to the chamber lunch once a month. Maybe it was really more than that, I can’t say for sure. But, because no effort was made to dissuade me of that opinion, I have to assume it was pretty close to on target.

As the years and my experiences moved along, the value and importance of civic involvement, support, and engagement became ever more apparent. We brought the community’s voice into our planning and service development and, even more importantly, we sent many library team members out into the communities to become known and to bring back real issues and opportunities.

Could a library/community connection get any better than that? According to author Dorothy Stoltz, it most certainly can! Moving beyond engaging organizations and local government in today’s issues and resources, Stoltz and company, in Inspired Thinking: Big Ideas to Enrich Yourself and Your Community suggest that by forming big ideas together, libraries and communities can achieve great things. Read on to find out more.

Your publisher describes this book as something that can help library leaders to cultivate inspired thinking. So, what’s the difference between regular thinking, which library leaders do all the time, and inspired thinking?

Inspired thinking is the ability to find the threads of big ideas, such as helpfulness and joy, and weave them into the tapestry of life’s activities. Regular thinking is the

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Inspired Thinking: Big Ideas to Enrich Yourself and Your Community
Dorothy Stoltz
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ability to rule out what doesn’t work in order to find what does work—for example, researching and selecting a learning management system that best suits one’s organization. By combining inspired and regular thinking we can harness the benefits of both. To take this query one step further, many of us in the library field, like many people, form an emotional opinion in place of “regular thinking.” This tendency can lead to an unfortunate atmosphere of supposition over thinking. Regular thinking, however, focuses us to analyze—without conjecture or opinion—and make pragmatic decisions. Inspired thinking increases our understanding to express big ideas to enhance life. Finding a harmonious blend between the two can magnify the success of a project. Going back to our example: when we consciously express helpfulness and joy while choosing and implementing the right learning management system, we add value to organizational learning—no matter what our current level of excellence is.

So, how does one cultivate it?

Humor, optimism, and curiosity are good starts for cultivating inspired thinking. All of us from time to time can imitate these qualities instead of expressing them. The antidote is to learn not to impose limits on ourselves or others, but to contact higher intelligence, whatever that is. For example, we learn to find humor in the face of adversity without diminishing the seriousness of a situation. Laughing gently with ourselves and others, not “at them,” leads to the ability to think at higher levels. Humor helps us stay above the fray of blaming something or someone—because it minimizes taking one’s self or life too seriously. When we tap optimism, we are expanding our organization’s ability to grow and respond to community needs. We can tap and express curiosity by gently prodding ourselves to ask, hmm, what’s possible, how can I turn each problem into an opportunity. We nurture our potential through humor, optimism, and curiosity. In these ways, we learn to open our hearts and minds to solutions—and in the process we cultivate inspired thinking.

You write in the book that libraries can make the impossible possible. Could you provide an example?

This year we are seeing many libraries making the impossible possible by serving communities while our buildings are shuttered for extended periods. Librarians across the country have stepped up as if they were destined to inspire their communities during the COVID-19 health crisis. They are showing how to move forward, especially in times of crisis. They lead by demonstrating what a loving, caring life involves despite what seems like insurmountable challenges. The librarian can be a role model for the big ideas of cooperation and integrity helping to achieve public health by everyone in the public acting responsibly.

You talk about the difference between leaders with closed minds and those with open minds. Are the “we’ve always done it this way” leaders close-minded and, if so, how can their minds ever be opened?

Yes, a closed mind can result in making decisions based on the adage, “we’ve always done it this way.” Such a belief, in turn, can create or reinforce a closed mind. Although it’s important not to promote change for change’s sake or to change without clearly thinking things through, an open mind sets the stage for unlimited possibilities. Some people may never attain an open mind. However, we can establish an atmosphere of open-mindedness with an organizational can-do attitude. A closed mind is one that enforces limits on thinking. An open mind is not one that is open to nonsense but is open to “unheard melodies.” Just because a human thinker has not yet thought of an idea does not mean that it does not exist. Nikola Tesla trained his mind to think in ways to rise above the level of the obvious. Tesla’s discoveries and inventions in the early twentieth century set the stage for many technological breakthroughs and modern conveniences, including alternating current (AC) electricity, radio, electric motors, X-rays, radar, laser, and wireless technologies.
Each one of us can train our mind to be open to unlimited possibilities.

**Talk about how you see technology in libraries being used to impact concepts like joy and unity?**

The expression of joy and unity can be a high-tech, low-tech, or no-tech experience. In recent decades, technology has demonstrated the ease with which people can connect virtually, learn online, and telework from home or anywhere. With the COVID-19 health crisis, a magnificent use of technology is enhancing communication throughout the world. Although some people may believe that the expansion of technology may trivialize the library, the world still needs libraries. “Technology alone cannot guarantee the exploration of ideas that can lead to profound discoveries. Technology alone cannot help anyone to learn to think intelligently, critically, and holistically” (xi).

The ingenuity of new and emerging technologies is expanding how to make the intangible tangible. We’re learning to blend big ideas with remarkable technology, such as robotics, 3D printing, artificial intelligence, information systems, social and digital media, virtual and augmented reality, and the Internet of Things. During the early days of the health crisis, many library maker-spaces were turned into “3D print farms” to produce face shields [personal protective equipment] for first responders. This pragmatic service wove the thread of big ideas into a tapestry of supporting the medical community (helpfulness), contributing to the maker movement (unity), and reducing panic by being confident and productive (joy).

Through the interconnectivity of technology platforms, people around the world are learning—as Alexander Pope promotes—to judge not only the parts, but to focus on the whole. A person can approach an examination of something (an online post or a virtual tutorial) in a balanced way—not too severe, not too permissive. Nikola Tesla wrote, “What we now want is closer contact and better understanding between individuals and communities all over the earth, and the elimination of egoism and pride which is always prone to plunge the world into primeval barbarism and strife . . . Peace can only come as a natural consequence of universal enlightenment.”

In your chapter on curiosity, you talk about lifelong learners as agents “of big ideas.” (p. 93) How can we make someone on our team who isn’t the least bit interested in learning learn? Or is there another option for them?

“The genius of library service is letting each person find his or her own way” (p. 96). We cannot change people who don’t want to learn (either those who work for the library or those who visit the library), but we can provide an open invitation to learning. We can recognize that everyone has the potential to learn and grow, even if they don’t yet see it—or actively resist it. The goal is to bring people together to help them accomplish collectively what they cannot do as an individual. Lifelong learning is an essential organizational core value for a library. It becomes a personnel issue if a staffer is falling short of job expectations. The ability of the organization to be healthy and strong depends on leadership’s ability to translate big ideas into good policies and procedures. When we strive to draw forth each person’s innate curiosity and joy of learning it is a worthy effort.

**You write that “stating an opinion is not thinking.” Why not and how can it be broadened?**

Opinion is supposition and may be filled with unhelpful, emotional reactiveness. Training the mind to discern a situation (to think without bias) helps us tap inspiration, make decisions, and produce results we want. Thinking, as described by Plato, is the soul talking with itself. Plato has challenged humanity to seek the big ideas (patterns of thought coming from universal principle). He encouraged us to train the mind to think and understand the big ideas which incorporate the eagerness to make things better. Whereas opinion is conjecture and may be clogged with bias of likes and dislikes and misunderstandings, clear think-
ing supports learning, growing, and understanding. The ability to think with a sense of discovery helps us get to the big ideas. “The big idea for libraries is to connect people to big ideas” (p. 6).

Considering the challenging questions posed by operating a library during a pandemic, how can leaders be inspired to move beyond knee-jerk decision-making?

One of the tools for moving past knee-jerk decision-making is using discernment (a big idea) to expand the realm of problem-solving and possibilities. It doesn’t matter our starting point of being closed- or open-minded, reaction- ary or responsive, fearful or confident. Discernment is an inspirational tool because it helps us judge situations in a helpful way. For example, the skill of discernment helps us read not only between the lines of a book, but it also clarifies the essence “above” the lines. An Emily Dickinson poem, “We play at paste, before qualified for pearl,” suggests that the art of jewelry-making with artificial (paste) gemstones is not a waste of time. The jewelry-maker gains experience to take the leap to using real gemstones (pearl). Thus, librarians can apply discernment when reading Dickinson to recognize above-the-mean understanding. Our learning as a profession through years of daily activities and events (paste) have helped us develop “gem-tactics” or skills to work with the expression of big ideas (pearl). The librarian’s pearl, big ideas, such as curiosity, integrity, and discernment, can inspire us to lead our communities through a pandemic to achieve public health.

What should librarians be “inspirationally thinking” about?

How can your library lead your community to promote big ideas, such as, goodwill and optimism? These and other big ideas, such as cooperation and integrity, are intangible elements; however, they are not frivolous, ephemeral, or whimsical. Pre-COVID-19 as well as now, many libraries are creating an atmosphere and aura of respect, goodwill, and integrity. It may seem impossible to make intangible concepts or big ideas into an active policy, but it’s possible. Library leadership and staff- ers can set the tone for how to respect every member and aspect of the community. It doesn’t matter a person’s income, politics, religion, lifestyle, reputation, or education, we are all part of a living energy impelling us to activate our potential. Librarians are at the center of helping individuals and communities realize their potential to enrich life.

Shakespeare was a master of making big ideas tangible, for example, mercy in The Merchant of Venice, and forgiveness and tolerance in Romeo and Juliet. During health epidemics when public theatres were closed, Shakespeare wrote some of his greatest works: Macbeth, King Lear, Antony and Cleopatra, Coriolanus, and Timon of Athens. An inspiring line during our current health crisis—or anytime—is from Coriolanus: “Action is eloquence.” No matter the situation at hand, librarians are leading people to tap their potential and apply energy and grace to their actions. Librarians are helping make big ideas tangible, including the big ideas of hope and joy to counter fear and confusion during a pandemic.

Ponder this: Making the intangible tangible is an active element to the overarching purpose of libraries—to enlighten humanity. How can libraries help individuals get to the big ideas?

How can inspired thinking help to initiate more civic engagement for libraries?

Inspired thinking can help librarians lead people to inclusive civic engagement. A community book initiative, for example, can be important to offer an opportunity to celebrate the goodness of a community. Residents can come together to ponder life’s big ideas, have a conversation, and bring out the best skills, talents, and potential of each other. One of the goals is to think through those big ideas. “A great starting point is Plato who referred to a big idea as an idea or pattern of thought stemming from the universal principle. Big ideas are blueprints for concepts that can help improve life. They embody the desire to make things better. Big
ideas are designs of thinking for optimism (Helen Keller), freedom (Thomas Jefferson), charity for all (Abraham Lincoln), and energy (Nikola Tesla)” (p. 3).

During the health crisis, many libraries rapidly increased online access and expanded free virtual resources, such as, electronic and audiobooks and magazines, video streaming, job searching, entrepreneurial support, and genealogical research. The remarkable shift to online programming for all ages helped people stay connected, reduce fear, and promote hope. However, these service changes are doing more. Libraries are showing that healthiness is a shared experience and best expressed by thinking clearly and wisely. By promoting cooperation, harmony, and love, libraries are bringing people together to accomplish collectively—community health and well-being—what they cannot do as an individual.

Rising from individual to whole teaches us to respect every individual in humankind—no matter a person’s background or level of achievement. Working with the big ideas of harmony and forgiveness help us grasp that by dint of discovering harmony and forgiveness within ourselves, we discover their power within humanity.

When libraries offer discussion opportunities about the purpose of life or the roots of optimism or the lack of common sense, librarians can lead people to get to the big ideas. The tools are at our fingertips in library resources, such as great and time-tested thinkers (Plato), poets (Elizabeth Barrett Browning), authors (Ralph Waldo Emerson), and inventors (Nikola Tesla), and activities, such as makerspace or other experiential learning. Libraries help people discover concepts like harmony, grace, and ingenuity and express them.

Your book’s subtitle is “Big Ideas to Enrich Yourself and Your Community.” Can you break that down to a few simple tips to keep in mind, just to get started on so worthy a journey?

First, most of us in the library profession are probably already working with big ideas without consciously thinking about it. In large part the overarching purpose of a library to enlighten humanity drives our work—through our collections, online resources, programming, technology, and services. No matter where we are in the journey to enlighten humanity through libraries, any worthwhile effort can help lead to enriching the situation at hand. A few tips:

- Unlearn to make way for new learning and skill development, such as examining problems as opportunities instead of threats or using the entrepreneurial spirit to nurture our work instead of depending on the approval of others.
- Pay greater attention to strengths and accomplishments (ours and others) and what we can control (attitudes, intentions, and actions) rather than to what is annoying.
- Seek to understand big ideas through time-honored avenues, such as reading great thinkers (Plato, William Shakespeare, Alexander Pope, Abraham Lincoln, Emily Dickinson, Yogananda, Helen Keller, and many more), listening to great music (Mozart, Handel, Antonio Bertali, Johann Heinrich Schmelzer, and Sandra Boynton), and viewing great art (Monet, Michelangelo, Thomas Cole, Nicholas Roerich, and Salvador Dalí).
- Celebrate the many elements of success in libraries, in communities, and in life—helping to sustain momentum toward tapping big ideas and fulfilling our potential for inspired thinking.

REFERENCE

INTERESTED IN LIBRARY SOCIAL WORK TOPICS?

JOIN THE PLA SOCIAL WORK INTEREST GROUP

connect.ala.org
Civic engagement in public libraries can take many forms, from hosting community forums about race and equality to taking an active role in Census completion. These activities have the potential to improve community relations, build more cohesive social structures, and reduce disenfranchisement. A May 2020 ALA survey (www.ilovelibraries.org/article/how-public-libraries-are-responding-covid-19) about library response to the COVID crisis found several efforts by libraries to support civic engagement despite the limited access to their physical spaces. More than 1,500 public library survey respondents reported adding or expanding the following civic engagement activities in their libraries:

- community partnerships;
- making or distributing PPE;
- hunger-relief efforts;
- conducting patron wellness checks; and
- providing community resources about the crisis.

Completing the 2020 Census—a core civic engagement activity for any community—faces unprecedented challenges in the midst of the pandemic. The US Census Bureau is tracking response rates, which in late October 2020 were averaging 67% nationally. The Census tracker can be found at https://2020census.gov/en/response-rates.html.

Libraries are facilitators, community hubs, and providers of information—making them critical to successful Census completion rates.

For more information about how your library can support Census activities, visit the American Library Association’s 2020 Census page at www.ala.org/advocacy/govinfo/census.

### 2020 Census Self-Response by State

The US Census Bureau’s map features self-response rates from households that responded to the 2020 Census online, by mail, or by phone. This state-by-state tracker can be found at https://2020census.gov/en/response-rates.html.

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