



Skills for 21st-Century Librarians: Learning Objectives for Library Programming

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Introduction

Skills for 21st-Century Librarians: Task Force for the Development of a NILPPA-Informed Programming Librarian Curriculum is an IMLS-funded grant initiative of the American Library Association (ALA) Public Programs Office. Working with Knology¹, a social science research organization, we built on earlier work completed as part of the National Impact of Library Public Programs Assessment (NILPPA).²

In that earlier work, we identified nine competency areas³ for library workers – across all library types – who do public programming. In the current project, we convened a task force of 12 leaders in libraries and library education to begin fleshing out these competency areas for potential use in teaching settings, including **library degree programs** and **professional development training sessions**.

The task force reached consensus about the following:

- There is a real need for a curriculum that covers all of these competency areas, and a great deal of excitement about creating it;
- The effort to develop the curriculum needs to be two-pronged: while ALA’s Public Programs Office can lead the development of professional development, we will need to work with ALA’s Accreditation Office and other stakeholders (such as instructors and current students) to successfully integrate this curriculum into degree programs;
- The original nine competency areas remain relevant and appropriate, updated to include both digital competencies and equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) considerations (following ALA’s social justice framework)⁴ in all nine areas.

¹ [Knology](#)

² [American Library Association, 2019](#); [Norlander, et al., 2020](#); [Sheppard et al., 2019](#).

³ [Library Programming Competencies](#) (excerpt from Sheppard et al., 2019)

⁴ [ALA’s Commitment to Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, Literacy, and Outreach](#)

Challenges & Opportunities

The task force also discussed a number of challenges and opportunities to keep in mind as we move forward.

Challenge / Opportunity #1: Lack of formal training

At the beginning of this process, we reviewed the landscape of training opportunities. While the review was not exhaustive, we found several telling patterns.

There were many more opportunities for short-term professional development than for formal coursework. Formal coursework was most likely to cover **knowledge of the community** – and quite unlikely to include **financial skills, creativity, or organizational skills**. Other areas were covered to a greater or lesser degree, and there were opportunities to expand all of them. Meanwhile, professional development courses were particularly likely to cover **content knowledge** and particularly unlikely to cover **financial skills, evaluation, or organizational skills**. Task force members' professional opinions largely aligned with these findings. They saw a particular need for more formal training in **interpersonal skills, event planning, and evaluation** as well as more professional development in quite a few areas.

Challenge / Opportunity #2: Mismatched goals

Task force members shared a sense that library degree programs and professional development have very different goals. While professional development tends to cover the day-to-day realities of librarianship, degree programs focus on principles of librarianship. Combined with Challenge/Opportunity #1, this points to a need to separate the development of these two types of library training.

Challenge / Opportunity #3: The COVID-19 pandemic

When the task force began meeting in early 2021, some participants raised concerns that the competency areas might need to be updated because they were developed and finalized prior to COVID-19, in 2019. The practice of library programming changed considerably with the pandemic: when in-person events were canceled across the US, many library workers expanded their digital, remote, and hybrid programs. Reacting to this shift, the task force considered two potential revisions to the competencies: (1) adding a tenth competency area for digital skills, or (2) identifying and expanding upon related digital skills within each of the existing nine competency areas. The task force came to the conclusion that identifying digital components of the existing competency areas was the preferred approach, since it highlights continuities between different modalities rather than the differences. They also thought it would be valuable to explicitly identify EDI considerations for each competency area, using ALA's social justice framework. These conclusions are reflected in the learning objectives outlined below.

Specific Learning Objectives

This section lays out specific learning objectives to prioritize within each competency area. This is not intended to be an exhaustive list of all learning objectives that fall within each competency area, but rather a set of objectives that are **instructable, important, and currently under-instructed**. Not all library workers will need to develop all of these skills, as they may be working as part of a team. Furthermore, different library types operate in different contexts with different missions.

Task force members identified these learning objectives through deliberation, including review of other courses and learning materials (both inside and outside the library field) where available. As ALA continues to build additional professional development and work toward incorporating these competencies into degree programs, they should focus on the following considerations.

We include several resource recommendations for each competency area, all of which are based on suggestions from the library field. No resource list is intended to be exhaustive.

Content Knowledge

Works toward sufficient knowledge of program content to deliver, manage, or evaluate programs, according to role.

Learners will be able to:

- Identify content priorities based on their community's needs, particularly the needs of underserved library users and stakeholders;
- Assess their own knowledge and gaps in their understanding and build partnerships to complement their gaps; and
- Assess the expertise of potential presenters and partners and incorporate them effectively into programs.

Resources Recommended by the Library Field

- ALSC's [Intellectual Freedom Programming Toolkit](#)
- [Let's Move in Libraries](#)

Creativity

Responds to challenges and opportunities with innovation, flexibility, and creativity to resolve them.

Learners will be able to:

- Troubleshoot a number of technical and practical programming issues and develop on-the-spot solutions;
- Develop and enact contingency plans;
- Build a toolbox of strategies that promote and apply creative thinking, particularly to create more inclusive and equitable programs; and
- Foster lateral, non-linear, and iterative thinking and decision-making, both individually and in a group setting.

Resources Recommended by the Library Field

- [Workshops: Design Thinking for Libraries](#)
- [10 Workskills for the Post-normal Era by Stowe Boyd](#)
- Anab Jain & Alex Taylor, [Experiments in Feral Futuring](#)

Evaluation

Works toward using statistical and qualitative tools to measure program effectiveness and impact on all community audiences, including those that have historically been un- and under-served; and using this information to iteratively improve the development and delivery of programs.

Learners will be able to:

- Recognize and use frameworks for culturally responsive and equitable evaluation;
- Discuss and explain the importance and role of measurement and evaluation in library activities;
- Discover and use tools and resources available to librarians to effectively evaluate programs;
- Differentiate components of the evaluation process (activities, formative assessment, summative assessment, etc.);
- Create valid instruments (surveys, interviews, observation tools, and other methods) that measure the intended outcomes using best practices such as universal design, backward design, and systems design;
- Collect evaluation data and analyze patterns in these data, including disaggregation to consider differences between groups; and
- Communicate results of evaluation and use findings to improve future programs.

Resources Recommended by the Library Field

- [Understanding By Design Framework](#)
- [Research Institute for Public Libraries webinars](#)
- [Project Outcome](#)
- [PLA Data-Driven Librarianship](#)
- Marvin Alkin & Anne T. Vo, [Evaluation Essentials](#)
- Shannon L. Farrell & Kristen Mastel, [Considering Outreach Assessment: Strategies, Sample Scenarios, and a Call to Action](#)
- [SOAR Assessment](#)

Event planning

Works toward planning, managing, and implementing events that are both developmentally and culturally appropriate, and accessible for their intended audiences.

Learners will be able to:

- Explain how core values of librarianship infuse all aspects of library event planning;
- Differentiate strengths and weaknesses of online, hybrid, and in-person events, as well as different virtual platforms and participant structures, for learning, enjoyment, inclusion, and accessibility;
- Identify and address
 - safety considerations (e.g. COVID-19, emergency exits, online harassment),
 - accessibility considerations (e.g. mobility, digital divide, language access, common allergens), and
 - sustainability considerations (e.g. environmental impact, staffing needs);
- Create contingency plans for common logistical challenges (e.g. rain);
- Employ camera and lighting techniques, as well as sounds, backgrounds, and filters, in online events to treat the screen as a stage; and
- Create a seamless and dynamic experience for different activities in a virtual environment that keeps participants engaged.

Resources Recommended by the Library Field

- [How to Host | Manifesto for Good Online Sessions](#)
- ALA's Programming Librarian [Program Models](#) and [Program Ideas](#)
- The [Wallace Foundation's Knowledge Center](#)
- [Remake Learning](#)
- The [Creative Youth Development National Partnership](#)
- The [Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning](#)

Financial Skills

Works toward budgeting, seeking funding for, and managing the finances of a program or suite of programs, often in collaboration with external partners.

Learners will be able to:

- Understand and discuss common financial documents such as budgets, 990s, and basic contracts;
- Use common budgeting tools and techniques as needed for individual programs and/or institutions or departments;
- Employ financial techniques like cost-benefit analysis and futurecasting at the individual program and/or the institutional or departmental level;
- Communicate about budgets and financial documents so all stakeholders (including those historically left out of these conversations) can understand, to support more informed and collaborative decision-making; and
- Identify a variety of resources (grants, partnerships, etc.) and apply to work with those resources.

Resources Recommended by the Library Field

- [IMLS Grants](#)
- [ALA Public Programs Office Grants](#)
- Emily Drabinski, [An Organizer's Tale](#)
- Miya Tokumitsu, [Do What You Love: And Other Lies about Success and Happiness](#)

Interpersonal Skills

Works toward communicating effectively and appropriately with all stakeholders and audiences to provide consultation, mediation, and guidance during programs and in other contexts relating to programs.

Learners will be able to:

- Create a welcoming and respectful environment;
- Identify varying norms of communication among different groups of library users and adapt accordingly;
 - Recognize hindrances to effective communication, particularly online (e.g. Zoom fatigue; lack of eye contact and body language; pandemic fatigue, etc.);
- Apply de-escalation, conflict management, and facilitation techniques to encourage difficult conversations, both online and in person;
- Make programming initiatives part of larger relationship-building work within communities the library serves;
- Create accessible environments both online and in person (via the use of e.g. closed captioning, description readers, interpretation); and
- Support an ecosystem of information sharing within existing organizations.

Resources Recommended by the Library Field

- ["How to Be a Better Listener" from Smarter Living Guides of the *New York Times*](#)
- [ALA's "Leading Conversations in Small and Rural Libraries: Facilitation Guide"](#)

Knowledge of the Community

Works toward understanding the communities for and with whom programs are developed, including their particular needs and interests; building respectful, reciprocal relationships with community members and organizations; and ensuring access to a wide variety of programs for all community members, especially those who have historically been underserved or face other challenges to access.

Learners will be able to:

- Develop an ethic of care and curiosity that leads their work;
- Apply EDI lenses to community conversations and program development.
- Distinguish between and use a wide range of methods (e.g. circulation data, participatory asset mapping, listening skills, focus groups, social media skills, publicly available demographic data, etc.) to understand the community and particularly to identify populations that are being excluded currently;
- Build partnerships by using a listening model;
- Collect, access, interpret, apply, evaluate, and communicate community data (qualitative and quantitative);
- Program with an eye to their own institution's strategic goals; and
- Invite a wide range of voices to co-create and co-lead programs.

Resources Recommended by the Library Field

- [Partner Power: A Technique for Building More Authentic Community Partnerships Right from the Start](#)
- [Pods and Pod Mapping Worksheet from Bay Area Transformative Justice Collective](#)
- [Libraries Transforming Communities | Tools, Publications & Resources](#)
- Mary Davis Fournier and Sarah Ostman, eds. [Ask, Listen, Empower: Grounding Your Library Work in Community Engagement](#)
- Kathleen de la Peña McCook, [A Place at the Table: Participating in Community Building](#)
- Leslie Edmons Holt & Glen E. Holt, [Public Library Services for the Poor: Doing All We Can](#)
- Dorothy Stoltz, [Inspired Collaboration: Ideas for Discovering and Applying Your Potential](#)
- Vicki Hines-Martin, Fannie M. Cox, & Henry R. Cunningham, eds., [Library Collaborations and Community Partnerships: Enhancing Health and Quality of Life](#)
- Julie Biando Edwards, Melissa S. Robinson, & Kelley Rae Unger, [Transforming Libraries. Building Communities: The Community-Centered Library](#)
- John Pateman & Ken Williment, [Developing Community-Led Public Libraries: Evidence from the UK and Canada](#)
- Sandra Feinberg & Sari Feldman, [Serving Families and Children Through Partnerships: A How-to-do-it Manual](#)
- Janet L. Crowther & Barry Trott, [Partnering with Purpose: A Guide to Strategic Partnership Development for Libraries and Other Organizations](#)
- [Working Together: Community-Led Libraries Toolkit](#)
- Shannon L. Farrell & Kristen Mastel, [Considering Outreach Assessment: Strategies, Sample Scenarios, and a Call to Action](#)

Marketing

Works toward communicating information about programs to all community members who could potentially attend or benefit, using a variety of digital and analog channels in ways that are culturally and developmentally appropriate.

Learners will be able to

- Identify a range of approaches for program marketing (from signs in the library and around the community to social media) and map which techniques are most effective for which audiences;
- Develop a basic understanding of marketing technologies, graphic design, social media platforms and management to meet community communication needs and preferences;
- Create accessible marketing materials both on- and off-line;
- Develop and embed evaluation metrics (e.g., measurement) in marketing practices; and
- Create a marketing and communications plan for specific programs and an overall long-term plan that is tied to the library's larger strategic plan.

Resources Recommended by the Library Field

- The [Marketing Library Services newsletter](#)
- [Marketing Libraries Journal](#)
- Mark Aaron Polger, [Library Marketing Basics](#)
- Kathy Dempsey, [The Accidental Library Marketer](#)
- Marian Burk Wood, [Marketing Plan Handbook](#)

Organizational Skills

Works toward managing time and projects efficiently and effectively at multiple levels: individually, institutionally, and in collaboration with outside organizations and agencies.

Learners will be able to:

- Identify project management skills, tools, and approaches and contextualize them in the library setting;
- Divide large projects into specific tasks and assign responsibilities and deadlines;
 - Define milestones for a project and create a milestone schedule;
- Manage their own time across multiple tasks and priorities, as well as the time of team members;
- Document their own work and progress across multiple tasks and priorities, and communicate with team members to streamline work transitions etc.;
- Use a wide range of digital programs and tools for organizational purposes (e.g. spreadsheets; calendars; etc.); and
- Collaborate effectively with partners.

Resources Recommended by the Library Field

- Possible tools: [Modifying Bullet Journaling for Everyday Organization](#), [Trello](#), [Evernote](#), [OneNote](#)

General Resources

Many of the resources listed above touch on more than one area, given the interrelated nature of these skills. In this section, we list additional resources that apply across the skills more generally.

- ALA's [Libraries Transforming Communities | Tools, Publications & Resources](#)
- Mary Davis Fournier and Sarah Ostman, eds., [Ask, Listen, Empower: Grounding Your Library Work in Community Engagement](#)
- ALA's [Programming Librarian website](#) and [Facebook Group](#)
- YALSA's [Teen Programming Guidelines](#)
- WebJunction
- The Facebook Groups [Millennial Programming Ideas](#) and [The Grown-Up Table](#)
- Dawn Abron's library programming blog [Teen Services Depot](#)
- Resource guides from state libraries, like the [Alaska State Library's](#)
- EDI-focused resources, such as
 - ALA's [Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion](#) page
 - National Museum of African American History & Culture, [Being Antiracist](#)
 - Alberta Civil Liberties Research Centre, [Anti-Racism](#)
 - [Libraries Respond: Black Lives Matter](#)
 - [Programming to Promote Diversity](#)
- Mizuko Ito et al., [Hanging Out, Messing Around, and Geeking Out: Kids Living and Learning with New Media](#)

- ALSC's [Virtual Storytime Services Guide](#)
- [Connected Learning Alliance](#)

Recommendations

In light of the above, we recommend that ALA and its Skills for 21st-Century Librarians task force:

- Move forward in creating **professional development opportunities**, with a focus on interpersonal skills, creativity, and understanding the importance of taking an EDI lens to library work. Given the different goals of library degree programs and professional development, described in Challenge / Opportunity #2 above, we recommend developing professional development resources first, while developing the relationships needed to elicit change in LIS classrooms.
- Explore **additional training pathways** through librarianship institutes and state libraries.
- Seek **buy-in from accredited library degree programs** through the following strategies:
 - Survey recent MLIS graduates about their level of preparation for the public programming components of their jobs;
 - Share information and findings in existing communities of practice and publish in journals that library faculty read;
 - Make a case for public programming as a core aspect of librarianship;
 - Build relationships with accreditors.

Input From the Field

More than 40 library professionals and instructors took the time to share their thoughts with us on social media and through a short survey. The field is generally positive about this effort, the work that has been done so far, and the project's goals. We noted several consistent themes in the comments.

A Clear Need

Nearly every person who provided feedback said that either they, their colleagues, or their students would benefit from additional training in at least some of the areas identified. Those who had received training in these areas said it helped them feel confident at work.

Yes, as Library Director currently and then as a member of the library staff (Adult Services) for the past 13 years, many of the skills mentioned in the document I've had to learn on my own and with no real direction from the prior Library Director. Many of the ideas are simply common sense. But, I really wish I had had more formal training rather than just learning on my own.

— Public Library Leader

Yes, students would absolutely benefit from this type of training. LIS education should be a balance of theory and practice. I currently teach two different courses on programming that are youth related but see the need for a more generalized LIS course on outreach, marketing, and programming. Frankly, I think LIS programs should incorporate programming skills into their program/degree learning outcomes that are aligned with the ALA Curriculum Standards and that these standards should be updated by ALA to specifically call out programming and outreach.

— MLIS Instructor

Community Leadership

Several people suggested that in the future, Skills for 21st-Century Librarians should focus more heavily on community leadership and partnerships, particularly because community leadership requires a shift in mindset.

The document only mentions once that programs should be co-designed and co-led with community members, in the Knowledge of the Community section. This is an incredibly important component, as well as a shift in mindset for most librarians. As such, it should be embedded throughout the document.

— Public Library Leader

I would have liked to see community partnerships made more salient throughout the report. The topic of partnerships appears in multiple sections, including Financial Skills and Knowledge of the Community. I believe it needs to be its own area: How to initiate, respond to, sustain, and (as needed) end multi-institutional programming partnerships.

— LIS Faculty Member

[C]ommunity involvement in building/planning the program might be just as important as knowledge of the community. It certainly should supercede content knowledge, at least in public libraries.

— Public Library Leader

Nuts & Bolts

A particular strength of this work, in the eyes of members of the library community, is that it teaches what one person referred to as “nuts and bolts” rather than stopping at theory.

Delighted to see this approach and a return to the nuts and bolts of operation. [...] I understand the need for theory and pedagogy, but running a successful, community responsive library is way more than theory, metadata and information science. I see a lot of nuts and bolts questions coming from people who have completed their MLIS (congratulations!) on library FB groups. I think this is a wonderful step in creating well educated librarians who have the tools to make their libraries the center of their communities.

— Public Library Leader

Financial Skills & Grant Writing

Multiple people highlighted the need to learn financial skills, from grant writing to grant management.

I see there is some mention of grants as a source of funding, but I would like to see more emphasis on grant writing as a part of MLIS curriculum. As a recent MLIS graduate (August 2020), the curriculum I participated in made very little mention of grants and how to find, write, and win grant funding. This type of funding is so important and often means the difference between a library honoring their mission statement and library goals and not being able to do so.

— Public Library Leader

Trauma and Health

Several people drew connections between library programming work and trauma. They thought programming librarians would benefit from skills to manage both potential conflict and harm in the library, as well as trauma and violence outside the library.

I saw your posting on ALA Connect re: an update of skills needed for programming librarians. Enoch Pratt Free Library is [training librarians](#) in grief counseling, dealing with trauma, mediation and such to help heal Baltimore's epidemic of violence and disparities rooted in systemic racism.

— Library Consultant

Librarians need training about their well being and how to keep their work safe from trauma, toxicity and pressure. More emotional intelligence, non violent communication and mindfulness training please. Thank you!

— Library Consultant

Specificity

Library professionals noted that not all competencies and specific skills would be important for all individuals. Specific priorities will always depend on library type and context, as well as the role.

[I]t should be made clear that a practitioner might not be doing all of these activities but would need to have knowledge about them even if working with vendors/performers/partners who would take on some of these activities.

— Academic Library Administrator

The objectives are terribly complete -- they seem to cover any programming-related task that someone might be asked to do -- including some that other departments should be doing for them whenever possible (ROI studies, finances, marketing plans).

— Library Marketing Consultant & Trainer

The Continued Importance of On-the-Job Learning

Several library professionals pointed out that many of these competencies are easiest to learn in professional development settings, through mentoring, or on the job, rather than in a degree program. While they welcomed the effort to provide additional training opportunities, they did not think these opportunities would or could fully replace on-the-job learning.

All of these competencies are key to successful programming although most of them are acquired on the job instead of through formal training in the MLIS program or structured professional development. Moving forward with the recommendations, keeping the challenges in mind, would be helpful to future library workers. Creativity and troubleshooting are hard to teach formally. These may be better approached through mentoring/apprenticeship.

— Library Worker

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