

# National Impact of Library Public Programs Assessment

## A Briefing Paper

Library-based public programming has become an integral part of library services in all types of libraries and all sizes of communities across the country. Lectures, performances, discussion groups, workshops and forums of all kinds have dramatically extended the library's original focus on literacy and knowledge to providing an extraordinary array of new learning opportunities for all audiences. Library programming has long been closely tied to community needs and interests. In an age of extraordinary societal, informational, economic and political change, however, new research is required to assess the relevance and impact of traditional library programming and to guide the future of the library's changing in the community.

This briefing packet introduces some of the initial findings of researchers from New Knowledge Organization Ltd. following a review of materials from the Archives of the American Library Association's Public Program Office, a survey of 275 programming librarians across the country, a collection of the literature recommended by advisors of the upcoming meeting, review of some recent research articles, and some of the discussions resulting from the review to date. Common to all of this review has been the persistence of anecdotal information about public programming in libraries, but scant research that evaluates impact or proposes models for best practices across the field. This preliminary synthesis of archived and source documents will continue to be developed as a useful tool to inform the ongoing discussion to develop an empirical research agenda.

Also missing from the analysis are insights into how public programming decisions are made, especially those that are designed to respond to community needs. Some programs are drawn from such available resources as the National Endowment for the Humanities, the National Endowment for the Arts, and National Science Foundation. Others respond to current anniversaries such as Sesquicentennial of the Civil War and more local commemorations. Issues related to health, the environment, government, and multiculturalism are frequently seen, many of which appear to address timely concerns.

Despite the frequent mention the overarching goal of addressing community needs, it is difficult to see such a process in action. The literature did not reveal a consistent approach to the selection of themes and titles or community input. The overall lack of information on program selections, along with the paucity of evidence of public impact, seriously impacts the library community's needs for best practices and fresh guidelines.

A fascinating list of intended outcomes emerged and is included in this packet to illustrate the diversity of topics and themes of recent programs. Also included in the packet are the results of the survey of 275 programming librarians that accompanied the archival review. The final pages are brief "thought pieces" that define emerging issues that in the world of informal learning. They are included to stimulate fresh ideas about programming themes, sources, formats, evaluation, and sharing.

## Emerging Issues

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

These include the following:

An analysis of the learning impacts of different program formats. When are lectures more effective than workshops?

How does active audience engagement impact outcome? What kind of approaches does your audience want?

How do you incorporate different learning styles?

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

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

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

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

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

Establishing shared and meaningful metrics of evaluation. How can a culture of evaluation become more widespread, practical, and useful? What are the core metrics that would create a coherent and comprehensive picture of the impact of library programming nationwide?

Critical thinking skills at the heart of learning. Can libraries build an emphasis on and awareness of critical thinking skills into programming? What kinds of programs would demonstrate an incorporation of such thinking skills into the discussions, products, and outcomes of public programs?

## A Range of Intended Outcomes

Most programs were accompanied by statements of intended outcomes, even though an outcome evaluation was missing in most of the reviewed programs. This sample was drawn from a variety of sources within the ALA PPO archives. This section represents an intriguing overview of the breadth and variety of some of the intended program outcomes.

### American Presidential and Political History

- Audience will understand Abraham Lincoln's political and constitutional challenges of the Civil War
- Audience will be better able to understand the principles of democracy
- Audience will understand George Washington and how myths created and strengthened his position as President as well as securing the stability of a struggling republic
- Audience will understand Alexander Hamilton's central role during the Revolutionary War and Founding period in creating the economic, constitutional, social and journalistic, political and foreign policy templates for modern America.
- Audiences will understand Lincoln's role in relation to the war for the Union, the Emancipation Proclamation, black soldiers in the Civil War and the end of the Lincoln's life.

### Civil Rights/Multiculturalism

- Audience will be better able to understand how literature addresses civil rights topics.
- Audience will advance the perspective that the lessons of freedom have been reborn throughout African-American history and that those lessons have served to nourish each succeeding challenge.
- Audience will learn how to plan and implement Middle East programming to engage communities, locate speakers, prospect fundraising activities
- Audience will engage with ethnic literature to increase diverse readership and build circulation
- Audience will learn to trace their Hispanic roots through research techniques, record location and geography
- Audience will gain knowledge about Supreme Court ruling in Brown vs. Board of Education decision to understand and appreciate advancements in civil rights for African Americans.
- Audience will gain an understanding for the elements of multiculturalism on US college campuses
- Audience explores the migration experience from Africa to America, from south to north, from rural to urban—a powerful and recurring theme in twentieth-century literature.

### Health and Related Science

- Audience will engage healthcare professionals to develop an increased understanding of terminal illnesses, "end of life" decisions and healthcare systems
- Audience will gain an appreciation for personal and societal responsibility and ethics related to scientific experimentation and other aspects of contemporary American life

### Arts and Literature

- Adults and youth, respectively, will gain knowledge of how poetry fosters an understanding between neighbors next door and within the global community
- on racism, women's health and teenage sexuality
- Families will gain literacy skills through humanities focused content; Socratic Method and collective learning

- Audience will explore the epic tradition in the literature of the Americas through reading and discussions representing different regions of the Americas- North, South and Central.
- Audience will learn about censorship through discussion and review of banned books

#### Humanities

- Audience will understand the place and power of religion is essential to American global leadership
- Audience will learn how the ascendance of “infotainment” has affected broadcasting and democracy in the United States
- Audience will learn about economic; social and political contributions of Second World War through personal accounts of 40 men and women from four American towns
- Audience will explore questions of home and away and what it means to belong.
- Audience will read and discuss Japanese works that might explore industrial and technological advances, ancient traditions and venerable culture intrigue us, survived the devastation of World War II to become one of the most productive nations on Earth.
- Audience will delve into transcendent force of romantic love’s power to destroy, redeem and ambiguity
- Audience will consider 2000 A.D. and how Western Civilizations approached this time as an ultimatum or culmination.
- Audience will understand medicine in the context of Renaissance science to address ethical questions
- Audience will gain an appreciation for the impact of hip hop publishers and authors to gain insight into racial, ethnic and regional aspects of the urban environment and urban fiction
- Audience will gain a better understanding of present-day American political thought about how individual choice and freedom coexist with duty and loyalty to make judgments on where America wants to go from here.
- Audience will explore determination, perseverance, and previously unrealized talent and extent to which we have fulfilled the promise of America.
- Audience will examine Constitutional foundations, Supreme Court rulings and federal government rulings to appreciate the history of protected air, water, public lands and wildlife in America for last 30 years.

## Public Programs Librarian Contacts Perspectives on the project

The following summarizes the results of the survey of 275 librarians that adds their direct voice to the programming discussion.

A listwise deletion method was used for participants with responses missing from the two qualitative, open-ended questions. Consequently, these participants were excluded from the qualitative data analysis. Additionally, IP addresses that were repeated in the datafile were flagged and screened for the possibility of duplicate survey response patterns (n=34 flagged). However, review of the responses revealed unique response patterns for each of the duplicate response sets. Timestamps from these duplicates also indicated that the responses may have been completed from the same computer, but that all of the responses were completed with time differences greater than 8 minutes.

The final sample of 275 librarians was analyzed using Leximancer software to explore relevant themes and concepts. The Leximancer program provided a helpful visual tool to see how different concepts (i.e., recurring words and similar words), formed larger themes and the ways in which they were connected (Figure 1). Colors signify importance and relevance, where red, orange, and yellow are “hot” topics, and green, blue, and purple are themes of less importance (less represented in the responses).

**Table 1**

*What is the type of library at the center of your work? (n=272)*

Type of Library	Frequency
Public	231
Academic	24
School	4
Special	13

Note: Two respondents did not complete this question

## Respondents' Hopes for the Project

*"What do you hope might be discovered through the project, which could advance public programming?"*

The dominant theme that emerged from librarians' responses (refer to red balloon in Figure 1) suggested that the community was most important to library programming. This theme seemed to highlight librarians' needs for programming, as they are inextricably based on the wants and need of their local communities. The need for an accurate assessment of their local community's wants and needs was often mentioned, illustrated in the following two responses:

*"How we can implement good programs based on the community needs and desires."*

*"What kind of programming is most in demand. How to better determine what will work best for different communities."*

As a central theme, community was closely connected with concepts such as needs, support, projects, impacts, information, and resources. A number of responses indicated that librarians would like to identify their connections with their local communities, while also evaluating the impact, and consequently the importance of their program services on their communities. The following response begins to illustrate these needs:

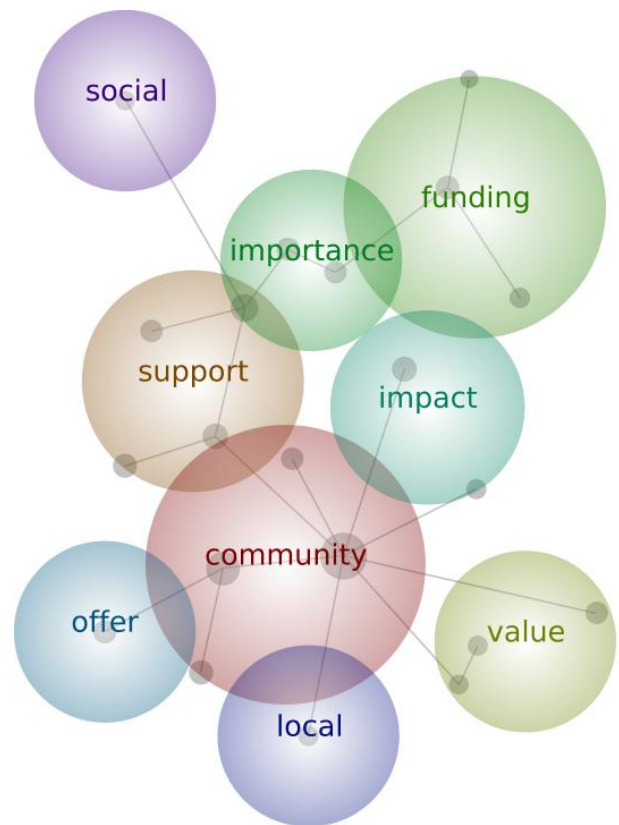
*"Based on the description above, it would be wonderful if this project could support and reinforce the importance of libraries by showing that we have an impact on our communities, not only through our material resources, but through library programming."*

The second most salient theme (refer to orange balloon in Figure 1) that emerged from the analysis concentrated on programming *support* by pulling together the concepts of *projects*, *resources*, and *programming*. The overwhelming majority of responses described the library's need for both financial and research-based support, noted in the following two responses:

*"Data that provide justification for the financial support and manpower required to put on programs in libraries."*

*"The data should help secure library board support for creating library budgets that allocate funds specifically for adult programming (in addition to children's and teen programming)."*

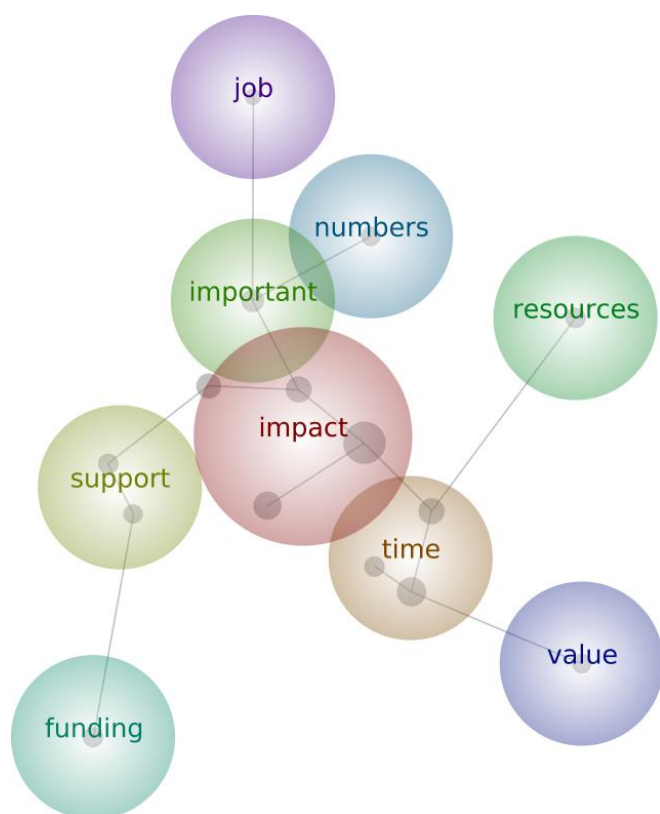
Overall, the librarians in this study identified a need to strengthen local libraries' connection with their surrounding community by considering the unique affordances of each community through an assessment of the public's wants and needs from library programming. Librarians also indicated a need for research-based program support, oftentimes cited as a method of obtaining and securing financial support for the library's continuing programming. Other prominent themes that emerged included *value* and *funding*, in which both described a need for the public to determine library programming as important and essential for sustainability.



## Fears or Concerns about the Project

The second open-ended question prompted librarians with the following:

*“Do you have any fears or concerns about what the project might find, which could have a negative impact on public programming?”*



Noted in the red balloon within Figure 2, the central theme that emerged from the responses was *impact*. Although responses in the previous question identified a need for the assessment of program impact, librarians were also concerned that their programming has little to no effect on the surrounding community. This is illustrated in the following response:

*“My only concern would be to find that programming does not have a positive impact on our community....”*

As a theme, *impact* included the following related concepts: *negative*, *learning*, and *adult*. The analysis revealed *time/staffing* to be the second largest theme, which closely linked with program *impact*. Respondents expressed concern with the possibility that considerable amounts of library staff time were allocated to programming development and implementation, while the programming may have a minimum impact on the community with too much cost to the library. The connections between program impact, time/staffing concerns, and library funding is illustrated in the following:

*“I worry a little about discovering the ‘cost per person’ of programming when we don’t always have a value measurable outcome. We might have spent 5 staff hours developing a workshop and only 5 people attend.”*

Additionally, librarians identified the possibility that library programming has little to no impact on life-long learning, illustrated below:

*“That there isn’t enough evidence that library’s play a part in lifelong learning. I know this isn’t true and I guess my biggest concern is administration seeing that adult programming is [not as] important as youth programming.”*

Responses from Question 2 indicated that librarians had prevailing concerns that the project might uncover a “low return on investment.” Librarians feared that their investment (time and financial) in public programming was potentially greater than what research data might report as the actual impact of the programming on each respective communities. The following two responses sum up these fears and concerns:

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

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