



# Journal of Library Outreach & Engagement

VOLUME 2 | ISSUE 1 | SUMMER 2022

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## Journal of Library Outreach & Engagement

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### PUBLISHER

Illinois Open  
Publishing Network  
1408 W Gregory Dr.  
Urbana, IL 61801

**EMAIL** dtracy@illinois.edu

**WEB** iopn.library.illinois.edu

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#### FROM THE EDITOR

**Sarah Christensen**  
**María Emerson**  
**Matthew Roberts**  
**Mara Thacker**

*University of Illinois  
Urbana-Champaign*

## Letter from the Editors

We start this letter with two pieces of exciting news. First, a new co-editor-in-chief joins our staff to keep JLOE thriving. Our second piece of news is that after some pandemic-related setbacks, we are back on track to publish two issues a year. And this issue has some exciting content. But before we dive into this issue's content, we would like to introduce María Emerson, our newest member of the JLOE editorial team. If you've noticed fun new content on the JLOE Twitter and Facebook accounts, you can thank María.

María started working at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in the summer of 2021 as the Student Success Librarian. For the past six years, she actively developed outreach programs for academic libraries, and she is very excited to join the JLOE team. María has experience from very small to very large institutions. She feels that no matter what type or size of library, it is important to find ways to reach and engage with users. María likes thinking outside the box and trying new ideas in libraries, especially if it is something that is not thought of as a "traditional" library program or role. Because of that, she is excited to work with a journal that publishes work that represents a wide variety of services and programs, and that encourages its readers to consider new ways to interact with their library users.

The expansion of our editorial board is not the only matter that is new for us this spring. In this issue, you will read our first international submission, discover peer reviewed pieces representing the work of public libraries, and a special solicited piece about librarianship in Ukraine. In addition, this issue's Idea Lab feature discusses the critical and timely topic of engaging with the public in light of increased pressure to ban books in the United States.

As the ongoing pandemic continues to impact the work that librarians do, several of this issue's articles address the effects of COVID-19 on existing library

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services and programs. Dietrich and Hinds exhibit agile planning skills to pivot a multi-institutional collaboration into a successful virtual event, while McElroy and Weis focused on alleviating the isolation many students felt as campus, and the rest of the world, closed. Finally, Anna Moorhouse examines how the pandemic inspired her and her colleagues to develop and implement a narrative-based communications strategy. Such an approach effectively and strategically promotes essential library services and represents their significance to patrons who may not have direct access to them.

Alongside these articles, readers will find other scholarly works and featured articles that concern a wide variety of issues and interests. Kristen Shuyler and Christopher Marcum focus on how students experience library outreach programming, and their articles examine how students enable librarians to assess their work with greater precision. On the topic of assessment, John Jackson provides a foundation to analyze the relative engagement of outreach program attendees.

Following the issue's release, we will continue our ongoing "Authors' Series" program. Hosted online, the initiative provides a setting for authors to discuss their work, and allows readers to engage with each author in order to learn more about their scholarship. We're planning for these sometime in mid-September, so keep an eye on our social media accounts for more information.





## SPECIAL FEATURE

Zoe LeBlanc  
 Andrew Janco  
 Alex Wermer-Colan  
 Quinn Dombrowski  
 Ann Kijas  
 Sebastian Majstorovic  
 Dena Strong  
 Erica Peaslee

*Saving Ukrainian  
 Cultural Heritage Online*

# A Conversation with the Organizers of Saving Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Online (SUCHO)

After the Russian invasion of Ukraine this February, a global community of volunteers has endeavored to help preserve Ukraine's online cultural heritage. While this community comprises over thirteen hundred volunteers, many of them work as librarians or in cultural preservation, including Quinn Dombrowski and Anna Kijas, two leaders of this group. Dombrowski and Kijas, along with Sebastian Majstorovic, have been instrumental in coordinating this community of experts across time zones and also spearheading what the *Washington Post* described as "a lifeline for cultural officials in Ukraine" (Verma 2022). To capture both their experiences, as well as how librarianship has informed SUCHO, we convened a roundtable with the organizers, as well as two active volunteers—Dena Strong and Erica Peaslee—who also work in galleries, libraries, archives, and museums (GLAM).

While this conversation represents only a brief window into the labor and work of SUCHO, we believe it will be particularly relevant for librarians; in particular, this work offers ways to fight against the destruction of libraries, museums, and galleries in Ukraine. Web archiving efforts cannot bring back the people who sought shelter in the Mariupol theater or restore burning churches from afar. But it is possible to preserve digital images and collections before servers go offline.

To help demystify how one even gets involved in a project like SUCHO, we asked our five panelists a series of questions over Zoom in April 2022. Each of our panelists joined the project at different times. Quinn Dombrowski, Academic Technology Specialist in the Division of Literatures, Cultures, and Languages, and in the Library, at Stanford University, and Anna Kijas, Head of Lilly Music Library at Tufts University. Anna organized an initial archiving event focused on music collections and joined forces with Quinn and their efforts to support displaced Ukrainian scholars.



Figure 1. Rodzik, Olga. Odessa Opera and Ballet Theater. Digital Illustration. Source: Olga Rodzik.

The effort quickly expanded as Sebastian Majstorovic introduced Browsertrix, a brand-new web archiving tool by Ilya Kreymer. Unlike the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine, which stores static images of web pages, Browsertrix stores a complete and interactive version of a site. This new tool initially required specialized knowledge and a virtualization tool called Docker, but the introduction of Browsertrix Cloud enables any SUCHO volunteer to archive complex sites without additional training.

Dena Strong joined the project early on and has been the heart and soul of communications in this online community, helping onboard new volunteers to the wide range of technologies and workflows. Erica Peaslee found her way to the group in hopes of helping with running Browsertrix, but soon combined her experience in museums and emergency management and began coordination monitoring efforts and prioritizing projects in response to events on the ground.

## The Discussion

To begin our roundtable, we asked the panelists how they would describe or define SUCHO.

**DENA STRONG:** I would describe it as a worldwide all-volunteer data rescue and backup team, trying to preserve the things that are already digital in hopes that they can be useful for reconstruction.

**SEBASTIAN MAJSTOROVIC:** I've seen it in several articles, now that people have used this phrase that we are kind of a "global group of twenty-first-century digital monuments [men]."

**DENA:** If you give me just two words, Digital Dunkirk.

**While SUCHO started in late February, it quickly grew at an exponential rate. We asked the organizers what had changed since those initial first days.**

**DENA:** The first two weeks things were changing drastically enough that I was redoing pretty significant parts of the training. I would learn something one day, and I would be teaching it the next day. And then the day after that it would be changing again; from Browsertrix to Browsertrix Cloud, going from the DSpace Python scripts to Colab<sup>1</sup>.

It's been fantastic. We are building this stuff on the fly as we go, like the Wallace and Gromit thing, where the little dog is putting out the train tracks a split second before the train gets there. That's us.

**QUINN DOMBROWSKI:** Yeah, the first four or five weeks it felt like this completely exhausting whirlwind. I feel like I don't remember March. Right? March must have happened, but somehow we went from "oh sh\*\*, a war" to early April and things in the meantime... yeah, it was just a complete blur.

I'm fortunate enough that my job has been really supportive. I did literally nothing else for an entire month. After about four to five weeks the work hit a rhythm and I wasn't completely exhausted at the end of every day.

**ANNA E KIJAS:** Yeah, it's like iteration on steroids. We're just iterating, iterating, and refining as we go. It was really intense, and I mean there was a

“...We are kind of a “global group of twenty-first-century digital monuments [men].””

<sup>1</sup> Browsertrix is a tool developed by Ilya Kreymer that allows you to programmatically “crawl” a website and capture webpages. Browsertrix Cloud is a version of the tool that works in the cloud. DSpace is a popular software for cultural heritage websites that present certain challenges for crawlers like Browsertrix, which is why the SUCHO team developed customized scripts, which can now be run in Google Colab notebooks. For more on these tools and workflows, see the SUCHO Tech site: <https://www.sucho.org/tech>.



need for it, because we were just figuring all this out, we were putting together tutorials and documentation and training and so forth, and doing the work. DENA: I think on the process front, on day one I was like “I don’t know what’s going on here,” I gotta learn what’s going on here so that I can then write down what’s going on here.

So I was making sure to build signposts, you know, it was not “do things this way,” it was “look at this editable document for what the latest information is, there’s one of those pins at the top of each [Slack] channel.” Or you know “here is the pattern that I’m establishing, for how people can document the troubleshooting in this world-editable Google Doc.”

Because so many people will come into the channel and say “Hi, I’m lost and I don’t have the time to reread the past two months’ worth of Slack so here’s my question.” And if they’ve got a table of contents sitting up there in a one-click Google Doc, it becomes a lot easier for people to make references than to attempt to scroll through that channel, and then the other channel two channels over, and then the other channel to find where the answers were.

QUINN: It was a really interesting shift going from the original three co-organizers to sort of working with sub-admins like Dena.

Everything that we did in the first round of things, we did what we would do for ourselves or people who think the way that we think. That works for a certain subset of the volunteers, but not everybody, so by broadening the pool, we had more people step up and write their own documentation and document workflows in different ways.

I think that ended up making it much more accessible to a bigger group of people than if it was just the three of us trying to run the whole show.

**While SUCHO is an exceptional initiative, it was also not the first attempt at preserving cultural heritage in the face of crisis. In 2016, Data Rescue was an active community that responded to fears that the Trump Administration would delete or neglect federal data related to climate change (Wiggin 2017). Anna Kijas has been very involved with Data Rescue, so we asked her and the rest of the team, how that model informed their work and also how SUCHO’s more spontaneous and unstructured model of collaboration differs from these earlier efforts.**

QUINN: I remember looking at the giant spreadsheet from Data Rescue that like you guys had cloned and thinking to myself “yeah, that’s not gonna work here.” It was so library, it was like...

ANNA: The most library of.

“ But when you’re in a war situation and things are changing day-to-day, or hour-to-hour, and websites could go down at any time, you basically have to embrace some of the chaos.”

QUINN: ...library spreadsheets I had ever seen, and bless them, obviously it worked for that and made sense for that project.

But doing everything, everywhere, all at the same time, across time zones, with websites going up and down, you cannot be that methodical. Now granted, we have created our own completely

ridiculous spreadsheet. But it is a monster of our own creation and responds to our own needs and the things that we have to do in this situation.

There is precedent for this kind of work with Data Rescue, but there’s a huge difference when you have two months to methodically archive things in a thoughtful manner across servers that you can more or less count on being up for the whole time. You can go about that systematically. But when you’re in a war situation and things are changing day-to-day, or hour-to-hour, and websites could go down at any time, you basically have to embrace some of the chaos.

Otherwise, you’ll just get stuck.

DENA: For my two cents, I told people regularly, “what I’m doing here I would never in a million years do in an enterprise production.” At the same time, I can’t go in and clean up the data and retroactively change things, because people have been trained on stuff we recorded at the beginning of March. That needs to bear enough resemblance to what they see today because we haven’t been able to redo the training. I would love to clean up the workflow. I would love to fold things together and standardize things. I can’t do that right now because there are so many people depending on the thing being the way it is and I’ve got to be very careful with even, you know, phrasing changes to the status columns. Fifteen hundred people out there are not going to re-watch the training. You know, because they have already got the thing they’re doing.

SEBASTIAN: Yeah, I think it’s important to emphasize that this is an emergency response.

One thing I will credit us with is creating spaces where things can happen with a certain free flow. We never could have imagined that. We weren’t even sure if we wanted to make a Slack organization. But that was one of these little decisions. Should we open up a channel for that? Ok. And then things start happening in these channels and people start doing things with the spreadsheet that I didn’t know was even possible.

I think that maybe a combination of humanitarian crisis and new digital spaces/tools contributed to us working in such a creative manner.

DENA: I also love how people’s standards of success have continued to escalate as we’ve gotten more and more tools online. People are like, “I don’t know if I can get all five hundred thousand pages. What happens if my five hundred thousand-page Browsertrix Cloud runs out?” I’m like, “that’s five hundred thousand pages more than they would have had otherwise!” Put in a line for somebody else to redo it more extensively later if we have the time, but keep moving.

**Given the unprecedented scale of SUCHO, we asked the organizers what they thought was unique about their processes and operations that enabled volunteers to collaborate, to teach, and learn from one another. When a volunteer joins SUCHO, their first task is joining the Slack team, which to date has 31 channels and 1,371 members. Volunteers are encouraged to introduce themselves and then depending on their skillsets are directed to certain channels. We wondered how much this workflow was by design or an emergent property since it has helped many volunteers find their niche quickly and feel confident contributing to the project.**

DENA: I would love to say it was intentional, but I have a feeling it’s a happy accident. I don’t know how you build that from scratch on a scale of fifteen hundred people, aside from being in the chat channels as regularly as you can.

And I feel bad about how much I’ve not been able to be there lately. I can’t do twelve hours a day when I’ve also got my day job and my life. But when I could, for a couple of weeks in there, it was really helpful to be able to be the cheerleader scanning to see when a person was confused, and saying “hey if you don’t like this, maybe this other thing would work better.”

ANNA: I agree with you that it was somewhat of a “happy accident” that this turned into a community of people able to find their own niche and excel.

When we started this work, our goal was to create a community that would be able to do this work. We would facilitate the work, but not necessarily be, you know, responsible for all aspects. We wanted people to take the lead. And

they are. All across the different tasks and channels, they’re coming up with brilliant ideas and brilliant solutions.

It’s just this amazing, really great energy that exists across everyone here. People are focused because we have this shared goal. We’re trying to archive and save all this content. So I think it’s been very motivating for people.

You know, I think most of us are working regular jobs or have other responsibilities, in addition to this, but we’re still so eager to jump into this and help in any way that we can. It’s just really been amazing to see how people come together.

Another challenge beyond simply coordinating all these volunteers is also the fact that this type of initiative might attract bad actors, from trolls to more organized efforts. We were curious about how librarianship and information sciences informed SUCHO’s approach to user experience and data privacy for volunteers, and how much they had to refine their processes along the way. *DENA*: That is one of the things that changed over the course of March because on day one I didn’t perceive that being as much of a consideration as it was two to three weeks later when we started locking down certain channels and separating out certain websites.

Operational security things, like to not talk about where these things have been moved to. That’s one of the places I think a diversity of perspectives is really, really handy. I used to work for a start-up company that was doing Department of Defense secure operating systems, but that was securing the bits, not securing the physical objects.

*QUINN*: We tried really hard in the beginning, and for a long time, to stay out of the physical world. We really didn’t want to touch anything but websites. When you’re just dealing with websites, there are fewer security concerns.

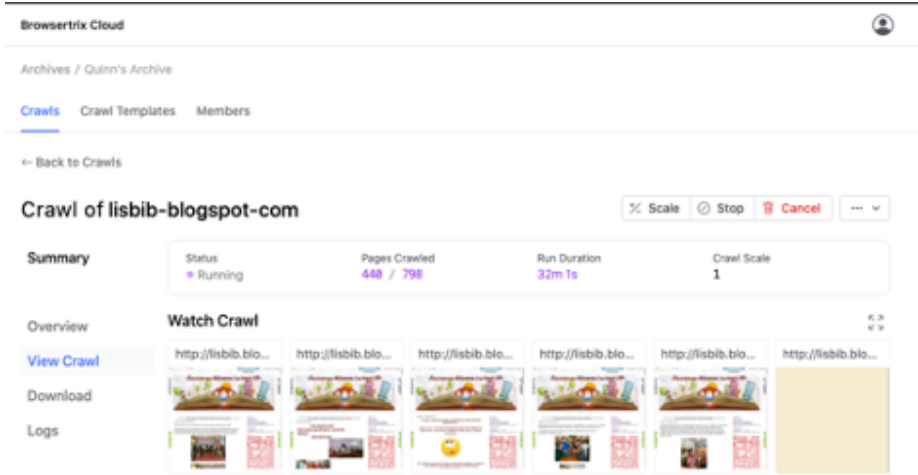


Figure 1. Screenshot of Browsertrix Cloud

But it turns out that it is actually impossible to cleanly divide the digital from the physical because people need digitization equipment and, for a while, we were trying to pass it off to other people. But it eventually became clear that we couldn’t sustainably maintain those boundaries. Things started getting porous, and as the physical world dimension crept in, then complications followed.

*DENA*: There is a very sizable portion of our volunteer base who would never have been able to install Browsertrix on their own computer. For them, Browsertrix Cloud is transformational. I’m one of them. I could never have installed Docker on my one and only machine, when Chris Nelson told me he turned three machines into bricks trying to get Docker running on Windows

machines.<sup>2</sup> I’m like “yep I cannot do this,” this is my window on the world and I can’t roll those dice. But with Browsertrix Cloud I can do it. Even a six-year-old can do it and I love it!

*QUINN*: So Sam [Quinn’s eight-year old] woke up at 6:18 this morning with a nightmare, and crawled into my bed. What he wanted to do to cheer himself up was use Browsertrix Cloud to archive some Ukrainian websites. I had to break it to him that we can’t do that right now because we’re migrating the infrastructure, so instead we looked at Ukrainian memes.

But, I mean, being able to run a web archiving event at an elementary school is phenomenal. It’s just kind of hard to imagine SUCHO without that.

While we were fascinated to learn about the day-to-day operations of SUCHO, we were also curious about the lessons learned so far and what the organizers would hope to share with other similar efforts in the future.

*SEBASTIAN*: Well, we are in talks with different people, associations, and organizations to transfer the lessons that we are learning in SUCHO to develop preventive infrastructure and web archiving.

This needs to happen before a crisis of any kind, not just wars, but natural disasters as well, like floods or the recent fire of the national museum in Brazil<sup>3</sup>. A couple of years ago in my hometown, in Cologne, I saw the city archive collapse in 2009 because of construction of a subway tunnel. Cultural heritage can always be lost. We are talking to Europeana and some other places, and the goal is to try to implement mutual web archiving so that we don’t need to do SUCHO.

But beyond that, for me personally, I’ve been very interested in the last couple of years in how to bring people together online. I’ve done that only in a really small kind of framework. Where would you meet online to have a group discussion, a simple group discussion? There’s really only Facebook groups. There’s no other place where you can go and just have a group, not even a Slack with channels and so on, which is also a commercial product, by the way. So I’m really thinking, apart from the cultural heritage and archiving and so on, I’m really trying to think about how to bring tools together as a sort of platform for activism, something that you can replicate.

**We ended our discussion asking the panelists if they had any advice to offer to librarians’ reading that are hoping to get involved in doing this kind of work, even if they don’t have any prior experience with web archiving or humanitarian crises.**

*QUINN*: People aren’t going to prepare for a war in advance. Maybe what’s more realistic is to go find out who does web archiving at your library. Go find out who, if anyone, does social media archiving. Figure out where that happens in your organization and go get coffee with those people. Because that way, when the day comes that you need to do web archiving in a hurry, you won’t be cold-emailing them. Go make some friends over in that part of the library if that’s not a part that you already hang out in, and those connections will pay off.

*ERICA*: Talk to someone to make an emergency plan. Larger museums have them, some larger libraries probably have them as well. That even includes

<sup>2</sup> For those unfamiliar, ‘bricking a machine’ is a colloquialism that refers to a software or hardware update that breaks a machine, essentially turning it into a brick.

<sup>3</sup> In 2018, a fire gutted the National Museum in Rio de Janeiro, and more recently in 2020, another fire destroyed the Natural History Museum and Botanical Garden at the Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG) in Belo Horizonte.



what to do during a fire drill, like there's that one thing you've got to get out, there's going to be a list of what to do.

What we do in emergency management is what we call "exercises." It could be anything from a tabletop exercise like they implement in cybersecurity, to actual exercises where you get up, you go do what you need to do in the event of an emergency, and if you have to walk something out of the building, you actually pick it up and you walk it outside of the building.

If you're in an institution that doesn't advocate for that, I know the Smithsonian offers a model, and there are a lot of companies and nonprofits like Blue Shield and UNESCO. They all have guidelines, and American Alliance of Museums has kind of like "inspirational guidelines" that you can use to implement an emergency plan if you don't have the budget to go out and hire someone who does it for a living.

While these answers are only selections from our roundtable, we believe they provide a crucial window into SUCHO and thank each of our panelists for their time and thoughts. To learn more about SUCHO, you can visit their website <https://www.sucho.org/> and the group also has plans to publish a monograph on their experiences in the upcoming year. Most importantly though, we hope that this roundtable has underscored the importance of collective action and librarianship in times of crisis, and also encouraged librarians to advocate for this sort of preventive and emergency web archiving as part of your job description and/or library services.

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## EDITORIAL

Anna Moorhouse

University of British  
Columbia Library

# When the Doors Close: Using Storytelling to Promote Academic Library Services in a Remote Environment

## Crafting a Compelling Story

In mid-March 2020, the physical branches of the University of British Columbia Library (UBC Library) closed temporarily in response to the COVID-19 outbreak. During those first few months, library services shifted dramatically as librarians and library staff developed new online programming, managed an increased volume of web archiving and deposits into UBC's institutional depository (cIRcle), worked to quickly supplement the library's electronic collections, and found new ways to help faculty make their course materials available online.

We at the library learned that even when our physical spaces were inaccessible, the library's services, collections, and programs could be adapted to suit a new environment to support our patrons. We also discovered just how critical those services are within a remote academic environment, where patrons must rely on the online services provided by the library to continue their research and studies. As University Librarian Dr. Susan E. Parker noted in her Report to the Senate for the 2020/2021 fiscal year: "The past year has

demonstrated, perhaps as no other, that the expertise, collections and programmed spaces offered by UBC Library are indispensable in supporting the missions of teaching, research and learning that are the heart of UBC."

To promote these changes, our communications team created the three-part series, "Supporting the UBC Community during COVID-19" (Moorhouse 2021c), which was published on the library's website starting in May 2020. Our team's initial aim in publishing these stories was entirely

practical—we needed to get the word out about the new and adapted services available to our faculty, staff, and students. We needed our patrons to know that the doors were closed, but our librarians and library staff continued to be available and ready to support the campus community using our most effective communications tool: storytelling.

I joined UBC Library in 2017 after several years working on marketing teams in financial services and the tech sector. Over the course of a decade, I have watched the rise of storytelling in digital marketing as the format of choice in customer testimonials, case studies, blog posts, and other content marketing pieces.

“Whether you are promoting library workshops or selling software, narrative communication works because it builds trust and conveys information in a way that is easier for your target audience to process.”

While the switch from private sector to academic communications presented its own unique learning curve for me, I found that the basic tenets of effective content marketing remain the same: whether you are promoting library workshops or selling software, narrative communication works because it builds trust and conveys information in a way that is easier for your target audience to process. A 2014 study published in PNAS, which examined narrative formats in science communications, suggests that information that is delivered in a narrative format is often associated with increased recall, ease of comprehension, and shorter reading times: "In a direct comparison with expository text, narrative text was read twice as fast and recalled twice as well, regardless of topic familiarity or interest in the content itself" (Dahlstrom 2014).

### Specialized services need simple promotion solutions

Looking at libraries, particularly research and academic libraries, the services and programs we offer are not always straightforward: what we promote is often specialized and sometimes conceptually new to our patrons. Workshops on research data management, copyright services, or scholarly communication are vital offerings, but are frequently steeped in jargon. Moreover, the library audience who would most benefit from these services often will not be familiar with the terminology and could miss key learning opportunities as a result.

For example, this year our library gained access to a comprehensive database of housing values (Moorhouse 2021d). The database is only accessible to UBC researchers and only through our library, thanks to the work of our librarians in negotiating the licensing agreement and converting this data into a user-friendly format. In interviewing the librarians involved, I learned quite a bit about markup languages, data distribution, and licensing, but I still needed to know how the campus community could make practical use of the database. Because of the technical nature of the resource, getting the word out about this database to the campus community was not straightforward.

The value of this converted database was that researchers in humanities and business fields could now access the data without having to hire computer science students to make sense of it first. It was a complex sell that needed to become a simpler story, which we crafted by speaking with researchers who were already working with the data and who could tell us about their work and the potential they saw for future use cases. Through the quotes we collected in these interviews, we could simplify our story to use terms and ideas that our target audience in the humanities and related faculties would recognize and understand.

### So many services, too little time

While the relative complexity of library offerings is certainly a notable challenge for library communication teams, often the bigger challenge is when you are tasked with promoting many related services at once. As Karen Mazurkewich notes so clearly in her *Harvard Business Review* article: "It's not easy to tell straightforward stories about complicated topics. But the solution isn't to cram all the ideas into one story or release. In fact, given that readers' attention spans are getting shorter, it's essential to follow this rule: Keep it simple" (Mazurkewich 2018).

This was the case for our story series during the first year of the pandemic.

As the second-largest academic research library in Canada, UBC Library has 15 branches and divisions, which our communications team of four—director, manager, design specialist, and coordinator—serves using a client-based model. As the Communications and Marketing Manager at UBC Library, my role is often that of hunter and gatherer: checking in with unit and branch heads to



cultivate a steady flow of notable new services, resources, acquisitions, and achievements that need to be promoted to the campus community and often beyond campus.

The basic narrative framework I use to develop our library service stories is based on a classic three-act story arc with a clear beginning, middle and end—though the arcs are not always laid out as linear narratives, thanks to devices like flashbacks and flashforwards.

The framework also draws on elements from other well-known structures, including the simplified hero’s journey and the CARL framework, which we’ll explore in more detail.

Developing a narrative format for library communications

The most popular narrative structure in marketing communications is undoubtedly the hero’s journey. Many organizations use a simplified version of Joseph Campbell’s original 17-step hero’s journey, popularized in his work on comparative mythology *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Campbell 1949). The simplified journey tends to distill the steps down to a three-act arc through which the hero leaves the ordinary world behind, learns to navigate an unfamiliar and special world, and then returns to the ordinary world, newly transformed by their experiences (see Figure 1).

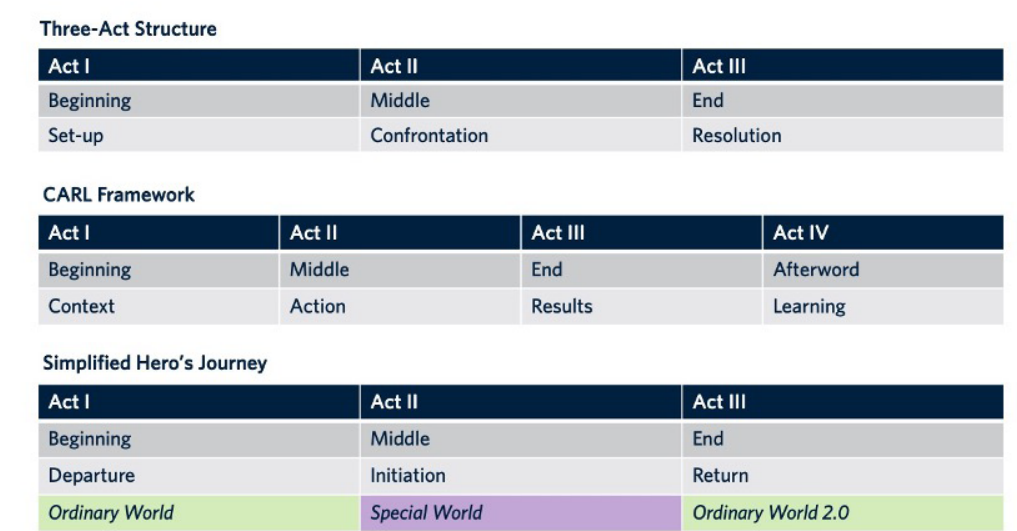


Figure 1: Detailed view of three types of narrative structures.

With the push toward user-centric marketing, the titular “hero” in most content marketing pieces is the customer or patron, who undergoes a journey that is made possible with the help of the product or service being promoted. That product or service is cast as a mentor figure who provides guidance that enables the hero to slay their own dragon.

The CARL framework (McCabe and Thejll-Madsen 2018) is best known as a job interviewing technique, but it has many similarities to the simplified hero’s journey. CARL is an acronym that stands for context (setting the scene), action (explaining the actions taken), results (showing what happened as a result of those actions), and learning (talking about what was learned). This framework is reflective in nature and offers the chance to take a longer view of the narrative arc in the fourth “learning” act, which allows space to reflect back on the action or results, or project into the future (see Figure 1).

Building our remote services story series

In the “Supporting the UBC Community during COVID-19” (Moorhouse 2021c) series, we built our stories on the idea of the ordinary vs. special worlds, and a fairly straightforward arc which moved from a contextual introduction, to the action, a result, and then either to a type of epilogue that looks forward to future projects or services, or an afterword in which the narrative’s events are enriched with additional context and reflection (see Figure 2).

The first story in our series (Blackwell 2020) laid out the details for the new and adapted services which had launched in the short few weeks after our physical branches had closed, and included testimonial quotes from patrons—students, staff, and faculty—who talked about the specific support they received from our librarians. We also included quotes from personnel at the library, who could speak to the rationale behind some of the decisions that were made in offering these new services.

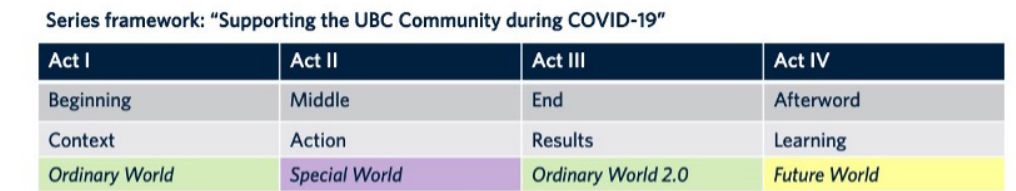


Figure 2: Series framework for “Supporting the UBC Community during COVID-19”

Due to time constraints, we needed to communicate many disparate service changes, quickly, to our patrons who were facing the start of a fully-remote term. But in our next installment (Moorhouse 2021b), which was written and published one year later, we wanted a space to recognize the efforts of our staff and reflect on a year of massive changes. More importantly, we needed to remind the wider university community that we had been here the whole time, supporting their teaching, learning, and research.

With so much ground to cover in the next story, including many large, complex services that had been engineered over the course of several months and tailored to address the knowledge gaps created by the new remote learning environment, we made the decision to split the next story in two and give everything more room to breathe. Our follow-up became a double-feature and our series became a trilogy.

The resulting publications, “How UBC Library has provided safe study spaces on campus” (Moorhouse 2021b), and “How UBC Library has delivered access to physical materials and virtual help” (Moorhouse 2021a), were written in tandem but published a month apart. The services depicted in each story are related thematically: the safe study space story focused on the library services at Irving K. Barber Learning Centre (IKBLC), which was one of the only buildings on campus open at UBC at that time with study spaces available to students. The final story focused on our materials pick-up service, which made the physical collections accessible to patrons through a controlled ordering and book retrieval process, and the launch of virtual drop-in reference help.

Let’s break down the structure of the second story (see Figure 3)

In this case, the story follows a linear narrative. In the beginning, I provide context: the story starts in September 2020, just after IKBLC opens back up to students. Rigorous safety and cleaning protocols are in place, and students can book study spaces through a system online and check in at the front doors. The building is open and services are functional. Then our action occurs—new

Story framework: "How UBC Library has provided safe study spaces on campus" (April 2021)

Act I	Act II	Act III	Act IV
Beginning	Middle	End	Afterword
Context	Action	Results	Learning
The IKBLC space is open, with rigorous safety and cleaning protocols	New needs arise! - Students need to print - Students need space for remote exams - Ref. questions landing at security desk	Met those needs: - Launched Print pick-up - Set hours based on first/last exam times - Stationed library personnel at front door	With planned return to on-campus activity, the IKBLC team is looking at what needs to be in place to open up further.
Ordinary World	Special World	Ordinary World 2.0	Future World
IKBLC is open and functioning	IKBLC has unforeseen service gaps	IKBLC is open and functioning with new services	What's next?

Figure 3: Story framework for "How UBC Library has provided safe spaces on campus"

needs arise. Library staff discover that some students are booking study spaces simply so they can enter the building to print documents. Then the library does a survey of 400 students who had previously booked spaces and finds that fifty percent of those students surveyed were planning to write their exams at IKBLC, which is a notable change in the regular student cycle for the space. Finally, library staff find that students are bringing their questions—about printing, book returns, and academic resource help—to security staff because security is stationed at the front door, whereas the reference desk is all the way on Level 3.

In our results, or resolution, third act, I write about how the library is meeting these newly identified needs by launching new services including: a printing pick-up service, where students can order their document prints online and pick them up at the front door; by setting building hours based on exam times to accommodate students who need a quiet, safe space to write those exams; and by changing up the space configuration and hiring additional student library staff to be at the front door near the security desk to provide peer-to-peer assistance and referrals.

The afterword in our story looks forward to the next stages of reopening for the building, and how the IKBLC team is making plans.

Let's do the same deconstruction for the third story.

Story framework: "How UBC Library has delivered access to physical materials and virtual help" (May 2021)

Act I	Act II	Act III	Act IV
Afterword (Flashback)	Beginning (Truncated)	Middle	End
Learning	Context	Action	Results
It's been over a year since the pandemic began and the library continues to adapt its spaces and services in new ways	Students are accessing physical collections, reference services and attending in-person workshops	Physical collections are inaccessible, drop-in reference hours are down to email only, and in person workshops not possible.	Materials Pick-up service launched, virtual drop-in hours offered at branches and other units, writing consultations and workshops moved online.
Ordinary World	Special World	Ordinary World 2.0	Future World
What's next?	Physical branches are open and operating as normal	Branches close temporarily because of COVID-19	Physical branches still closed but operating with new services

Figure 3: Story framework for "How UBC Library has delivered access to physical materials and virtual help"

For this story, our structure is shifted and non-linear. The story starts in the future world (at that time, May 2021), recounting that it has been over a year since the UBC community transitioned to remote teaching, learning, and research. Only then do we jump back in time to the original "Ordinary World" and resume a linear narrative, centering the story at the moment when the action begins.

With this structure, we provide only minimal context and include a truncated Act II, since our readers are already familiar with the context. Also, because this is the third story in our series, we are not required to recap much—instead we can link out to the previous stories in the series and invite our readers to catch up if needed. This allows us to devote more time in our third story to the Action and Results.

Since we established that Act III is a flashback to the past, and the Action begins in March 2020 when physical branches close temporarily, our Action occurs when the physical collections become suddenly inaccessible because of the temporary closures of the library's branches. In our final act, we show our Results: the library launches a materials pick-up service, so patrons can order their books online from the physical collections and pick them up safely in person, on campus. Similarly, reference hours, workshops, and consultations disappear during the action and then reappear in virtual formats.

Since our hybrid story format relies heavily on the simplified hero's journey, it is worth noting who exactly is the "hero" in these stories. We purposefully chose to cast the library staff and librarians as our story heroes as they were the ones who encountered the challenges. These staff and faculty members encounter challenges and make the changes necessary for the happy resolutions in the end. These are essentially their stories and it is through the interviews we did with them that we are able to tell these stories at all.

Getting the word out

Developing a content marketing story is only part of the work of promoting library services: finding an audience for the story after publication is just as important. If a story is posted on the internet, but no one reads it, has it even really been published?

To find such an audience, our communication team's editorial process relies on strategic amplification and cross-promotion. We try to leverage existing relationships to reach as much of our target audience as we can. For us, these relationships include UBC's central and internal communications teams, as well as other faculties and departments across campus. In all cases, we stick closely to each unit's individual submission guidelines and editorial preferences to maximize the chance that our submissions will be accepted and to minimize the amount of editing these teams may need to do before the story can go live on their platforms. Of course, not all our pitches are accepted, but it is always worth asking, especially when we feel our story will be relevant to the wider audiences on their channels.

Research the related units or community groups who may have an interest in the services you are promoting with your story. Do these groups have an e-newsletter, social media accounts, or event calendars where they accept external pitches? If they do, send them a short email pitch and include hyperlinks in your email that refer directly to the social posts you want them to reshare, or a toolkit with image assets in common sizes and pre-written newsletter copy.

Look for evergreen venues where your content can be excerpted or reposted to remain relevant even after the campaign period has ended. Because our story series had an element of looking back on a significant historical time for



our institution, these stories were not just promotional, but documentative. We reached out to the UBC Strategic Plan team who reposted our stories on their website as examples of UBC's Strategic Plan in Action, where they continue to live, generating new views and visits to our website.

### Getting good quotes to craft your story dialogue

A story generally needs to create a balance between the arc of the narrative, character dialogue (which is used to move the story further), and a depiction of key scenes through description. As applied to narrative communications content, you want to keep the story moving forward with dialogue, in the form of quotes from interviewees. These should be carefully chosen and placed within the story to create momentum, and any exposition or descriptive passages must always serve an identifiable purpose.

Go a little deeper into dialogue: let your "characters" speak with their own voices as much as possible. When I conduct interviews with our librarians or library partners for a story, I do it live. Sometimes, if they have a definite preference about sending in a quote over email, I am happy to accommodate that, but I get the best insights when I have a conversation. Now that video call meetings are standard practice in remote working arrangements, it has become so much easier and more common to ask if I can record the conversation while on a platform like Zoom.

After the interview, I create an audio transcript so I can go through our conversation with a digital highlighter to pick out the most relevant quotes. Then when I am crafting the story, I try to let my interviewees speak for themselves: I leave quotes as intact as I can and try to minimize paraphrasing.

Perhaps most importantly, I send the full draft back to each interviewee once it is ready, so everyone can review not only their own quotes, but can see them within the larger context of the story. This practice is different than what a journalist with a media outlet might do after an interview, as people quoted in news articles rarely get to vet their quotes or even see the story in advance of publication. However, in content marketing, our purpose is not simply to report what is happening, but to frame the story. Upon review, interviewees will sometimes want to tweak their quotes so that the story can be included in grant proposals, faculty newsletters, or donor relations. Through these stories, we not only promote the library, but also its people, and so it is important we have buy-in from everyone involved and that the people quoted in these stories can feel proud of their involvement.

### Images speak louder than words

While we did not have the option to do a photoshoot for the first story in our series, we did take the time to create original graphics to use in our promotional materials for the story. For the final two stories in the series, which focused more heavily on physical spaces that were open and operating, our team made the effort to set up photoshoots onsite to capture both the spaces and the people working in those spaces.

It is much easier to amplify stories when you can provide high-quality, original images as part of your marketing package: your story is more likely to be reshared online and more likely to be read if it includes an eye-catching image. Accordingly, we used photos in several other publications, including our annual report, so the time and effort our team spent setting up the shoots, despite the extra (but necessary) hoops our photographer and director had to go through to do so, was more than worth it.

### What's next?

While the pandemic continues to have an outsized effect on our library operations and services, our story series will likely continue as well, with new entries that chronicle how our staff and faculty rise to the challenge. Perhaps one day soon we will be able to cap off the series with a retrospective that captures how much UBC Library has permanently changed as a result of the events of the past two years, and how the services that were developed, sometimes in haste, and always out of necessity, have been refined and enhanced to better serve our university community into the future.

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### AUTHOR DETAILS

Anna Moorhouse, Communications and Marketing Manager, University of British Columbia Library: [anna.moorhouse@ubc.ca](mailto:anna.moorhouse@ubc.ca)



## EDITORIAL

Kelly McElroy  
Robin Weis

Oregon State University

# Distanced Engagement During COVID-19 Through Postcard Initiatives

## *Connecting with Communities*

The Valley Library at Oregon State University (OSU) Corvallis operates as the main branch location of OSU Libraries, which includes the Guin Library in Newport and the Cascades Campus Library in Bend. As part of the University's land grant mission, OSU Libraries serve community members as well as students, staff, and faculty around the state. In the Teaching and Engagement Department, outreach is one of our main roles. Kelly McElroy is an outreach librarian and Robin Weis is the Student Outreach Coordinator, working 15 hours per week while also studying fine arts as an undergraduate transfer student.

While the OSU Libraries continually seek to better connect with our students, faculty, staff, and broader local communities, the challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic changed the scope and logistics involved in outreach planning and implementation. For example, the library building closed in March 2020. Robin was hired in the summer of 2020 to maintain a student-led collection of themed books, and to manage several other book displays. However, when the library reopened in September for the fall term with socially-distanced usage, we had to find other ways to connect with students. For the library's reopening, study tables were spaced 6 feet apart and required reservations to use, and many synchronous physical activities were moved to remote participation or canceled entirely.

“We expected that most students would be resistant to participate in synchronous events that would either place them in close proximity with others or would demand too much of their time, as they were already facing the stresses of re-acclimating to in-person courses.”

Postcards to Campus (PTC) started as a student-led outreach activity responding to the challenges of campus closures. PTC invited students and other OSU community members to share reflections on the pandemic through postcards, both print and digital, which were displayed in the library building and online. Before working on PTC, we focused on remote programming via Zoom. As students were already expected to attend all courses through Zoom, we reasoned that more synchronous online programming would likely just add to their stresses. Then, as courses moved mostly back to face-to-face for the Fall 2021

semester, we faced new challenges of meeting our community back, mostly on campus, fully masked and ready to engage. We expected that most students would be resistant to participate in synchronous events that would either place them in close proximity with others or would demand too much of their time, as they were already facing the stresses of re-acclimating to in-person courses. When campus shifted more onsite, we were able to adjust the framework of PTC by including more collaborators, a clearer call for action, and a more cohesive final outcome. The adapted project, Postcards to Public Healthcare Workers (PPHW), centers on allowing students to engage with the project in

accordance with their own interest and time. Both projects feature a call for submitted postcards created by the OSU community, and while the two projects may initially seem very similar, we wish to highlight the ways they reflect the challenges of remote engagement and the benefits to developing adaptable programs. Given that much of our outreach as a library has typically been face-to-face—whether through passive programming like displays, or in-person programming like tabling at campus events, these two projects have given us an opportunity to grow and to incorporate what we learned into other outreach projects.

### Postcards to Campus

In Fall 2020, as many campus buildings were closed or had limited access, connection with the campus was a key concern for students. In his classes, Robin discussed with other students how remote programming negatively impacted his sense of connection with other art students on campus. Art students usually build community through shared studio space; in remote courses the closest approximation to shared studio space is a Zoom breakout room. Robin's classroom experience informed much of his interest in creating a sense of connection with remote students when physical and community connections were limited. Through brainstorming sessions, we reflected on various modes of distanced engagement and postcards came to mind. Post Secret (<https://postsecret.com/>), a call for anonymously-submitted postcards launched by Frank Warren, offered an early inspiration and model for submissions. However, rather than submitting secrets anonymously for exhibition in an online archive, we called on the OSU community to mail, virtually submit, or drop off their personal and OSU-specific sentiments related to the pandemic directly to campus for inclusion in a window display.

Working with the buildings team in our library, who manages the physical spaces, we chose the main floor rotunda—which has huge windows visible from the library quad—as a temporary installation site (see figure 1). Submitted postcards were shared through library social media, on the project's landing page, and then installed behind the windows. This window installation allowed for passersby to view the postcards from outside. (Although classes were largely remote, many students were still living on campus, and many workers remained onsite.) Then, the final home for PTC was the OSU Special Collections

and Archives Research Center ) COVID Collecting Project (<https://guides.library.oregonstate.edu/COVIDCollecting>) archive. The COVID Collecting Project is a call for OSU community submissions of letters, documents, and any archivable materials related to the COVID pandemic. PTC fits perfectly into this archive because it



Figure 1: A photo from one of the promotional spaces. This window is at ground level, on a major thoroughfare through campus.



offers an intimate view of the OSU community during a distressing and isolated time.

To best reach OSU community members, calls for postcards were installed in the rotunda windows with a QR code leading to the project landing page (<https://spark.adobe.com/page/DoBPihuByIA4D/>). An accompanying window display, postcards, and submission box were installed at The Book Bin, a local bookstore. Beyond these physical displays, we promoted PTC through the Library's Instagram account (<https://www.instagram.com/valleylibrary/>), listings in OSU Today (a daily campus newsletter), by targeted emails sent to campus partners, and by word of mouth. The project landing page served as a hub with links to virtual and physical submission sites, the postcard archive, and an information resource about the creation of virtual postcards.

To best coordinate distributing, collecting, and archiving the postcards, we received cooperation from departments across the library. From within the Teaching and Engagement Department, Robin stocked and maintained postcard drop boxes inside and outside of the library, printed postcards, and created Instagram posts. Resource Sharing and Collection Maintenance agreed to insert postcards and instructions in shipped outgoing materials (which was a larger part of their work while courses were largely remote). Circulation workers kept an eye out for postcards which were returned along with library materials through the book drop. We invited all library employees to share the project with their liaison areas. Special Collections agreed to include the postcards in their COVID collecting archive, as noted above.

As we continued planning submission and distribution sites for postcards, we considered the submissions related to mental wellbeing that flooded Post Secret and decided to reach out to Counseling and Psychological Services on campus for guidance. They suggested including contact information listing

their services and other local mental health services. This resulted in including the following statement on the blank printed postcards: "if you or a loved one is facing thoughts of self harm or suicide, contact 911 immediately. For non emergency mental health issues contact: the Benton County 24/7 Crisis hotline at: 1-888-232-7192 OSU's Counseling and Psychological Services at: 541-737-2131." This statement and variations of it were also included in the project's landing page and all related social media posts.

Collection sites included library material book drops, the main entrances of the library, the Memorial Union, the Corvallis-Benton County Public Library, The Book



Figure 2: The call for postcards, posted on Instagram and shared as a poster



Figure 3: The backside of the blank postcards we printed for Postcards to Campus, including the updated language pointing participants to mental health services.

Bin, and Interzone (a local coffee shop). However, most submissions came through the mail or digital submission, rather than use of the drop boxes; this is perhaps to be expected, given that the only people present on campus at that time were student employees, faculty, and staff. Postcards were formatted with the Valley Library's return address to assist with ease of submission. We did not include postage, but there were many local submission sites. The library distributed over two hundred blank postcards in total. Ultimately, 37 physical cards were submitted and 27 were submitted virtually. Robin scanned postcards and shared them through Instagram and for several weeks, OSU Today featured postcards from this project at the top of each daily edition.

We deemed this project a success as measured against our initial goal to affirm connection to campus while courses were almost entirely remote. We did not know what kind of engagement we would get, and while the numbers are fairly small compared to the size of our overall student body, we had participants from all over—including Cleveland, Ohio and Omak, Washington. We were able to share the exhibit broadly, through a widely-read campus newsletter, through social media, through the physical display, and ultimately, as part of our permanent special collections. As we will see, this project also was well-received by library staff, which led to our next collaboration.

### Postcards to Public Health Workers

Months after Postcards to Campus wrapped up, Kelly received a note from a librarian colleague who had recently been contacted by a faculty member in the College of Public Health and Human Sciences (CPHHS). The faculty member had shared an article about the challenges to public health workers as the pandemic stretched on, and asked if the library would be interested in partnering in some way to share gratitude to public health workers across the state. The librarian connected us to the faculty member, along with the liaison to the CPHHS. In the initial conversation, the library liaison brought up the Postcards to Campus project as a possible model to work from. While we had not originally thought of PTC as something we would repeat, it was immediately clear that the structure could be re-purposed well for this project.

This project—Postcards to Public Health Workers (PPHW)—differed from PTC in several notable ways. First, it was a collaboration with another unit on campus, CPHHS. This introduced new people with whom to coordinate and make decisions. We ultimately wrote up a program agreement which outlined the responsibilities of each partner team. Within the library, this included Robin largely taking on similar tasks as he had for PTC (e.g., creating the project landing page, coordinating social media posts, scanning postcards). The library liaison to Public Health worked with the Student Public Health Association to put together a LibGuide with relevant information (<https://guides.library.oregonstate.edu/public-health-workforce>). The students involved with the Student Public Health Association also made drop boxes, placed them around campus, and regularly collected physical postcards from those boxes. The Guin Library, which serves OSU's campus in Newport, hosted a box to get cards specifically for their local county. Our partners in CPHHS took on producing the postcards, and had an extensive



Figure 4: One postcard submitted to Postcards to Public Health Workers

campaign through student organizations and courses to engage students in participation

As opposed to PTC, this project targeted its audience to public health workers in the 32 local public health agencies in Oregon. While sharing completed cards publicly was part of the overall project plan, our ultimate goal was to have a polished product to share with each local public health agency. Robin worked with our CPHHS partners to think through what might work well, focusing on what would be easiest for health workers to view in their workplace or breakroom, without taking up too much time or space to install. Ultimately, we landed on sharing the postcards as a photobook, one printed for each agency. Special attention was paid to personalizing the photobooks by featuring postcards specifically made for each county.

In initial conversations, our partners in CPHHS were keen to get the project out and completed quickly. Our experience with PTC allowed us to encourage them to allow some extra time, and it ultimately stretched from late November 2021 through the end of January 2022. Ironically, this coincided with the surge from the omicron variant, and included the highest numbers of the entire pandemic to that date in Benton County, where our main campus is. While there are times when urgency matters, this project and its timing resonate with adrienne maree brown's (2017, 30) reminder to work at the speed of trust. The crucial goal at the heart of this project, to raise awareness of the struggles of public health workers and to remind us to share gratitude, remains timely and we can take the time we need to build the relationships to get us where we are going.

PPHW was a quantifiable success with over 150 physical postcard submissions and over 500 visits to the project landing page (<https://spark.adobe.com/page/btIhIE7O3OxVI/>). Much of this is due to the placement of postcard drop boxes in the library and across campus. While these additional sites made participation with PPHW easier, the maintenance of the drop boxes was simplified following PTC. While working with Circulation and Collections Maintenance to distribute and collect postcards for PTC, these methods did not have high submission outcomes. Our CPHHS partners took on the tasks of checking drop boxes, replenishing postcards, and sending submitted postcards to the library for documentation and social media posting.

The outcomes of this project reflect the benefits of performing at least some in-person outreach activities. Classes were largely back to in-person by the time PPHW launched, and members of the Student Public Health Association were able to go to classes to promote the project. Drop boxes posted in the library, in the College of Public Health and Human Sciences, and elsewhere on campus received greater numbers of submissions. Ultimately, it removed the barrier of having to find a stamp and mail in a card as many participants would have had to do for PTC. It is also worth noting that no virtual cards were submitted, while the virtual cards were quite popular for PTC.

Over the course of PTC, Robin noted that Instagram posts sharing project information often resulted in newly submitted postcards. Because of this, he suggested that a coordinated social media campaign should be used by all collaborators, with the ability to repost across platforms. As submissions filed in, a shared Google Drive with tailored social media posts, blurbs, and hashtags made virtual promotion much smoother. Throughout PTC, Robin had created social media posts, signage, and other promotional materials on an as-needed basis to encourage participation. By beginning PPHW with a shared drive for social media content, posting updates about the project was less time consuming and more of a natural part of the process.

While the landing page for both projects feature similar content (such as links to free design resources), the PPHW page includes specific suggestions about what to write to healthcare workers. Specific suggestions include "words of praise for healthcare workers," and a visit to the Current State of Public Health Workforce Libguide (<https://guides.library.oregonstate.edu/public-health-workforce>) for further direction. While PTC offered a blank slate for personal reflections, PPHW invited a more targeted type of participation, specifically in recognition of healthcare workers.

## Conclusions

In considering these two projects, Robin and Kelly both learned valuable lessons. For Robin, PTC offered an initial foray into project planning, goal-setting, and logistics for outreach, particularly in a digital format. PPHW expanded his view of outreach, incorporating additional collaborators and highlighting the need for shared goals, clear project frameworks, and open communication. As a student employee, he had very little experience coordinating with groups outside of the library beyond providing basic assistance. With PPHW he was able to use the project framework of PTC that he had helped develop, and share new insights based on his experience. This familiarity gave him the confidence to have substantive feedback and play a more active role in this and other collaborations.

For Kelly, these projects highlighted the importance of relationships in outreach. The PTC project started from a strong foundation within the library, seeking internal support in a way that fit into the workflow of multiple departments. Within the library and among broader community participants, the goal of connection during a time of isolation shone through. Without realizing it, the success of this initial project built a pathway for future projects. Not every email inquiry turns into a major outreach initiative, but in this case, the fact that our colleagues had been well-informed about PTC allowed us to find fruitful partnerships and reuse relevant materials. Finally, it provided an opportunity to build relationships both within the library and around campus through these projects. Making opportunities for student workers to truly lead outreach projects has benefits for the library, for the students, and for the campus community.

As we write this, our county faces its highest-yet COVID infections. The pandemic is not over, and we expect that academic libraries will be facing the shifting spectrum between "fully in-person" and "fully remote" for a long time to come. Libraries will do well to consider adaptable programs to serve changing needs, but also to recognize the limitations of an ongoing crisis: on time, on energy, and on capacity. Projects like the two we have discussed, which can iterate and evolve and be reused, and which build on and strengthen relationships, can be a part of any library's meaningful outreach work.

## Acknowledgments

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**Authorship Note:** Both authors contributed equally to this piece. Our names are listed in alphabetical order.

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## EDITORIAL

**Bethany Dietrich**  
Champlain College

**Kristen Hinds**  
Saint Michael's College

# Notes from the Pandemic Field: Challenge or Opportunity

## *Coming Together, Staying Apart*

It's happening! There are 150 people—students, faculty, and staff from two different academic institutions—in the virtual waiting room. There are twenty faculty and staff ready to facilitate virtual small group discussions on one of the most emotionally challenging aspects of a year that had no shortage of emotionally challenging moments. The event organizers and speakers are mentally running in circles around the event, but separately, in our own homes or offices miles away from each other. Here we go: an intercollegiate collaborative film discussion on *The Hate U Give* is ready to begin.

### Why This Book This Year?

In the pre-pandemic month of January 2020, the authors of this article connected about the possibility of partnering for Vermont Reads, a state-wide reading program through the Vermont Humanities Council (VHC). Each year the VHC selects a book and participating libraries are asked to partner with other local organizations to host a series of public events/discussions around that book. The book selections regularly cover topics of racial and social justice, most often through young adult literature.

The 2020 book selection was *The Hate U Give*, by Angie Thomas, which tells the story of teen Starr Carter in the aftermath of witnessing a police shooting of her childhood friend. It was an important topic before the summer of 2020, but even more timely with the unrest and protests after the death of George Floyd.

When investigating the Vermont Reads program, Beth Dietrich quickly identified St. Michael's College (St. Mike's) as an ideal partner for several reasons. Beth had recently left employment at the institution and had strong relationships with the librarians there. Champlain College (Champlain) and St. Mike's are of similar size, and though

our student bodies differ in their majors and interests, both campuses have a strong social justice ethic as demonstrated through our missions and academic programs. The two campuses are also located fewer than five miles from each other and connected by a free (to the students) public transit system.

Kristen Hinds was immediately receptive to the invitation and reached out to the education department's Common Read committee at St. Mike's, who were also excited about the collaboration. The Common Read (then in its eighth year) provides opportunities for discussion, critical analysis, and connections to school learning communities while also engaging participants to explore deeper questions, such as what are social justice, inclusion, and cultural responsiveness (Hinds 2021). The selected book is explored by individual classes, departmental gatherings, and campus-wide events. The

existing history of successful programming from the Saint Michael's College education department's Common Read led Beth to invite the Champlain education program to join the partnership. The existing collegiality of the two education departments was a natural fit for collaboration and bringing students in through curricula.

We knew that this was a great opportunity for both of our campuses to address complex issues of racial inequity and that we could enrich the discussion by including more students from diverse backgrounds. However, we also knew that a collaboration of this magnitude would be a challenge: meeting the academic and programmatic needs of both campuses, co-locating events and managing transportation for students, and making students from each campus feel comfortable to enter discussion with each other. It was also difficult to coordinate meetings with all the necessary stakeholders to plan the event.

Our marquee event was to add to the other campus integrations with a screening of the film version of *The Hate U Give*, complete with popcorn and refreshments, followed by an intercollegiate discussion. We knew that we had a fantastic ally in Dr. Margaret Bass, the Special Assistant to the President for Diversity and Inclusion at St. Mike's. A former professor of English literature, Dr. Bass had taught a 1-credit pop-up course on *The Hate U Give* in 2019, with a specific focus on the film.

Enter the COVID-19 global pandemic.

### How to Come Together While Staying Apart

The state of Vermont quickly locked down and began to establish guidelines for social distancing, mask mandates, and even limiting travel into and out of the state. In response, our campuses established guidelines with reduced classroom density, regular surveillance testing, and strict "no guests" policies.

Because of these policies, our fall semesters and our nascent collaboration were beginning to look a lot different. We realized we were not going to be able to be together in-person. Some students were not going to be on-campus at all, and because of college guidelines we were not allowed to mix our student populations in a physical location. Both campuses were locked-down to our own, regularly-tested student bodies. We decided to focus on this one event or collaboration and keep other related events on our respective campuses. We received seventy-five copies of *The Hate U Give* to be shared between the two colleges, so we could get copies of the books into the hands of students. Even so, how could we still pull this off? Do we cancel and try again another year? NO!

Enter Zoom breakout rooms and streaming film availability.

### Dotting the I's & Crossing the T's

At the time we were planning this, Zoom and other virtual meeting spaces were still relatively new to us. We were getting used to them in small group settings, but had not used all the advanced features. One of the benefits of hosting a film discussion via Zoom was that we could host up to 300 people in breakout rooms without needing to find a physical space large enough to accommodate that many people and groups, which would have been a stretch even in non-COVID times. We quickly realized that the breakout room feature would offer us a level of control over the make-up of the discussion groups that we would not have had in a physical setting. We wanted to make sure we integrated our two campus populations as much as possible. Each group needed at least one prepped facilitator, so we recruited faculty and staff from both institutions to fill those roles.

“We knew that this was a great opportunity for both of our campuses to address complex issues of racial inequity and that we could enrich the discussion by including more students from diverse backgrounds”



We wanted attendees to pre-register so we could plan the make-up of the discussion groups in advance and so we would know that we had enough facilitators. We determined that the ideal group size would be 8–10 people so that we could easily see everyone onscreen and we aimed to recruit twenty-four facilitators. Ultimately, we ended up with sixteen groups, each with a facilitator and one other faculty or staff member and a combination of both Champlain and St. Mike's students.

Because of the racial tension over the summer of 2020, we also wanted to be particularly mindful of our Black, Indigenous, & People of Color (BIPOC) students' needs and reactions to this discussion. Students would be required to attend the event for class credit and we needed to have a safe space for those most emotionally impacted by the events of the summer. At the suggestion of our campuses' diversity advisors, we created two affinity groups, one for students, faculty, and staff identifying as Black and one for students, faculty, and staff identifying as Indigenous or People of Color, acknowledging that those two groups might be differently impacted by the discussion. Attendees were able to self-select whether they wanted to be in one of these affinity spaces or randomly placed in another discussion group.

### Talk Amongst Yourselves

To set the tone for our small group discussions, we wanted to create a common experience for attendees. We invited Dr. Bass to give a brief keynote address to share her thoughts on the importance of the film, including current and historical aspects of it that would be critical to the conversations about race in our breakout rooms. The film and book are full of references to civil rights and racial justice movements, such as the Black Panthers and the murder of Emmett Till. In anticipation that not all students would have the context for understanding these references we created a guide to library and online resources to support their learning (see Primer for Historical and Pop Culture Context, 2020). To welcome people, we also began the session with an acknowledgment of our residence on the lands of the Abenaki tribe, Mohican tribe, and the Massachusetts tribes (specifically Pennacook and Pocumtuc), and a brave space meditation (ScottBey Jones 2021). After Dr. Bass's keynote, we transitioned into our small group discussions by setting ground rules from Courageous Conversations by Glenn E. Singleton (2015).

For our breakout rooms, all facilitators were given a script for the evening's timeline and were given a curated list of discussion questions. (See Appendix A). A week before the virtual film discussion, we had a training session with the facilitators to build confidence for hosting the event and guiding the discussion. We covered the order of events, answered questions, and gave space for them to voice concerns to empower them to use the questions as fit the conversation within their space. We also instructed them on how to use a Jamboard (a collaborative online whiteboard platform), which was going to be used at the end of the conversation to capture lingering questions and thoughts to help us move forward. While in theory this was a simple meeting, this is where the magnitude of our collaboration began to manifest. Coordinating twenty-five thoughtful, opinionated academics from two institutions into the same virtual meeting space felt like an accomplishment. It also gave facilitators the opportunity to suggest additions and improvements.

### A Sigh of Relief

The discussion is over. The event went well, our months of careful planning paid off. Beyond us all surviving the moments of panic before the start, we have evidence that meaningful discussions took place. At the end of our discussion

period, we asked each group to make a post to a Jamboard, including what questions the group was still grappling with or with the questions that will drive their thinking going forward. We received over thirty comments and questions, all of them thoughtful, such as "How can we, as allies, go from learning about these issues to performing action in order to help resolve these issues?" and "How can we educate ALL people about racial issues, including those who do not seem interested in learning?"

In closing, we encouraged participants to stay engaged and reiterated a statement from our Courageous Conversation norms: "To stay engaged is a refusal to let your heart and mind 'check out' of the conversation while leaving your body in place. It is a personal commitment each person makes, regardless of the engagement of others. It means remaining morally, emotionally, intellectually, and socially involved in the dialogue" (Singleton 2015).

### Takeaways: Opportunities aplenty

So that is what we are doing—we are staying engaged. We tried a huge messy collaboration during a really challenging time and found that it enabled us to deliver a well-rounded program with robust student engagement. It gave us new kinds of support and infrastructure for having difficult conversations around race and social justice, and created the basis for our two campuses to continue to collaborate. Our success came from working within existing relationships and growing from there.

We used Zoom out of necessity and felt that our event was largely successful in part because it simplified planning the event; we did not need to coordinate transportation or book a room large enough for everyone. Zoom gave us the opportunity to have important discussions but it felt a bit like a barrier for building community between campuses. Given that and our campus cultures, we are more likely to choose in-person events over an online model in the future.

In fall 2021 we made our collaborative circle larger by adding The University of Vermont and together we programmed a successful, in-person author visit with Jacqueline Woodson to discuss her book *Harbor Me*. The book's themes include immigration, race, bullying, forgiveness, friendship, and family, and how these topics are discussed among and affect young people. We had great turnout from all three campuses and students asked thoughtful questions during Q & A. After this year we firmly believe that our conversations around *The Hate U Give* and *Harbor Me* were made more meaningful by including more people and by enlarging the community. We hope to continue to provide opportunities for cross-institutional discussions and are looking forward to fall 2022 programming.

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## Appendix A

### Discussion Questions:

1. Rudine Sims Bishop introduced the concept of "Windows and mirrors" (1990) to explain how we see ourselves as well as learn about the experiences of others in what we read [explain for students who aren't familiar with this]. Starr often has to shift her behavior and language depending on whom she is with and her environment--what are the implications of this for how Starr navigates through two very different worlds? What are your thoughts about 'code switching,' and how might you relate to that? For some Black students, this movie may provide painful mirrors, which is why we have provided affinity spaces. For others, this movie provides important windows related to race and racism, which is the focus of today's conversation. What are the most important windows for you in this movie?
2. How does the movie deal with racism/issues related to race? How does the movie portray acts of protests, resistance, and activism?
3. Are lessons learned by characters? If so, how would you describe them? What do you think Lisa means when she says that "white folks want diversity but not too much diversity?" Are the lessons learned by viewers the same as the lessons learned by the characters?
4. What was the impact of violence in the film on you?
5. How do the characters display courage and compassion through their words and actions? How do they demonstrate compassion? Why are these important character strengths?
6. Phones play a significant role in the story, both for communication and recording important events. How does Starr's phone give her power in a situation where she otherwise wouldn't have any? What role are phones playing in the movement for Black lives?
7. If you have read the book: What did you like most about the movie, and what, if anything, did you miss?



## EDITORIAL

Ugne Lipeikaite

Electronic Information  
for Libraries

Raymond  
Amanyabyoona  
Adonia Katungisa

National Library of  
Uganda

Asia Kamukama

Maendeleo Foundation

# Community Engagement for Meaningful and Sustainable Digital Literacy Training in Uganda

Electronic Information for Libraries' Public Library Innovation Program (EIFL-PLIP; <https://eifl.net/programmes/public-library-innovation-programme>) has extensive experience running library projects in developing and transitional economy countries. Specifically, the program assists librarians with introducing innovative services to meet community needs and in reaching out to new audiences. Community needs assessment is critical to the long-term success of these projects and is also the first step in involving the community in the design of a service they want. In 2020, EIFL and partners (National Library of Uganda, Peer 2 Peer University, and the Maendeleo Foundation) received a grant from Enabel, a Belgian development agency, to support twenty-five public and community libraries in providing digital literacy training to women and youth. Within this project, we conducted an extensive community needs assessment, which included local government officials, librarians, and a wide range of community members. This first step of the project was very successful at engaging the attention and enthusiasm of the local authorities and community members. Asia Kamukama, a project partner and Executive Director of the Maendeleo Foundation, reflected upon their return from a consultation trip: "In every library we visited I saw lots of excitement from women," recalling one woman who told her "I will use every spare minute I have to try and learn something new. People judge us because we aren't educated and are without skills. This project is an opportunity for us to prove that we can learn and improve our prospects for the future."

## Project Background

Uganda has a population of 44.7 million. Women make up 50.7 percent of Uganda's population, and 49.3 percent of its population is male. Just over twenty-five percent of Uganda's population live in urban centers, while 74.4 percent live in rural areas (The World Factbook, 2020). Uganda, considered one of the poorest countries in the world, has achieved significant milestones in its fight against poverty over the past three decades, with poverty rates standing at 21.4 percent in 2016. However, while the poverty rate has fallen over time, Uganda still has a significant proportion of the population which, while not living in absolute poverty, is poor relative to the middle class and are vulnerable to falling below the poverty line in the face of a setback, such as the COVID-19 pandemic (see figure 1).

The World Bank estimates that the medium-term outlook for Uganda has worsened considerably because of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and that risks are tilted heavily to the downside. If the impact of the pandemic lasts longer than three years globally, or the virus spreads more widely in Uganda,

this could heavily affect Uganda's economy and productivity and hence slow down recovery (The World Bank, 2021).

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, information and communication technologies (ICT) are playing an essential role in mitigating some negative effects of the pandemic, such as disruptions of education, job losses, and others. There are 12.16 million internet users in Uganda (26.2 percent of its population). Mobile phone use is more prevalent, with 60.3 percent of the total population owning one or fewer mobile phones (Digital 2021 Uganda). According to the Uganda Communications Commission, the main obstacles to internet use are a lack of free or affordable access to technology; a lack of computer and online literacy skills; and limited awareness about the wealth of information the internet has to offer on education, employment, communication, and other opportunities (Muyomba, 2019).

Women and unemployed youth have less access to computers and the internet when compared to other demographics, most. Women and girls have limited independent sources of income, lower literacy levels, and lack confidence with technology (Bridging the Digital Gender Gap in Uganda, 2020). Unemployed young people also struggle to afford internet access, while at the same time they need practical and marketable digital skills that are in high demand in a competitive job market (Competing in a Digital Age, 2019).

To address the digital skills gap, in 2020 EIFL-PLIP engaged three partners—Peer 2 Peer University (<https://www.p2pu.org/en/>), National Library of Uganda (<https://www.nlu.go.ug/>) and Maendeleo Foundation (<https://maendeleofoundation.org/>)—to develop a project to narrow the digital divide by enabling women and unemployed youth to participate in digital society.

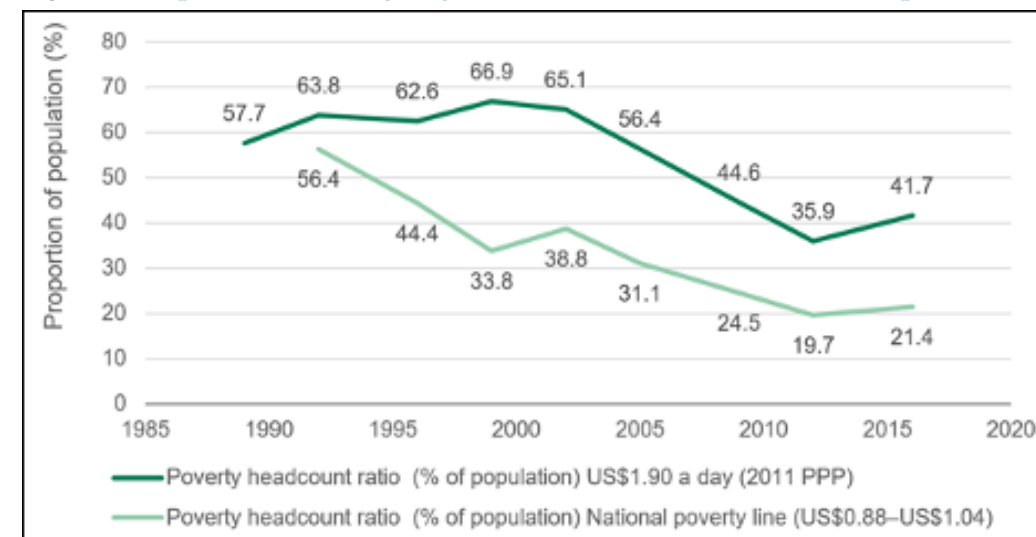


Figure 1. Level of poverty in Uganda over the last 30 years. Source: Poverty in Uganda: National and Regional Data and Trends, 2020

maendeleofoundation.org/—to develop a project to narrow the digital divide by enabling women and unemployed youth to participate in digital society. Digital Skills and Inclusion through Libraries in Uganda ('Digital skills @ your local library,' for short) is a two-year project that will improve the capacity of twenty five public and community libraries that already have computers and internet available for public use (see appendix 1). These libraries will offer digital skills training specifically to women and unemployed youth and connect them to free online learning opportunities. In addition, the project will reach out to remote rural communities, organizing camps at which people will learn digital skills, including using mobile phones to connect to the internet and find information and services.



It is expected that by the end of the project:

1. Up to twenty-five public and community libraries across Uganda will introduce or upgrade their digital literacy training programs.
2. At least 11,500 people will gain basic information literacy skills or improve their existing skillset.
3. At least two thousand learners will attend online courses to access knowledge and information that will be useful in their daily lives.

Methodology of Community Needs Assessment

Project implementation started in 2021 and soon after we began to plan for an extensive community needs assessment study. The process included six key elements:

1. Contacting all public and community libraries, which were identified in the project-planning stage, and putting together a site visitation plan.
2. Developing questions and discussing the assessment process with partners.
3. Developing a questionnaire to be filled out by librarians in charge as well as a protocol to guide community meetings with women and youth.
4. Facilitating twenty-two community meetings and twenty interviews with librarians.
5. Compiling and analyzing data gathered through the questionnaire and community meetings.
6. Sharing the summary of findings with project stakeholders, including librarians, project partners, and project funders as well as some external stakeholders (for example Uganda Communications Commission, which is in charge of regulating the ICT sector and has been supporting ICT infrastructure in public libraries).

After initial contact with the pre-identified libraries, a team made up of representatives from both project partners based in Uganda (NLU and Maendeleo Foundation) put together a plan to visit twenty-four locations during March 2021, with the goal of achieving the following objectives:

1. Meeting with library authorities (mainly local governments that run public libraries and the NGOs in charge of community libraries) to bring them on board, present and explain project goals, and sign MOUs (memorandums of understanding) for official participation in the project.
2. Meeting with librarians in charge of selected libraries to provide them with in-depth information about the project and expectations from participating libraries, and to update information about library ICT infrastructure and any current digital training programs.
3. Running community meetings with local youth and women’s groups to learn about their needs for digital skills and content for online learning.

For the first objective, we developed a draft MOU with local governments, which were sent to authorities in advance. The MOU listed the roles and responsibilities of project partners and participants. The main responsibilities of local government were to support the library’s ICT infrastructure and staff. Meanwhile, the librarians committed to introducing or upgrading their digital literacy training programs by training at least five hundred people in basic digital and mobile literacy, and ensuring that at least one hundred learners will attend online courses to access knowledge and information useful in their daily lives (see table 1).

For the second objective we developed a questionnaire to be filled out during the interview with the librarian in charge. The questionnaire was meant to examine the status of ICT infrastructure in the library (number of computers and internet connectivity), the status of digital and mobile training (what digital skills trainings are currently available, how many people get training per month, does the library register trainees and issue certificates), and finally address specific community interests with regards to digital literacy and online learning (topics of interest, preferred format and duration of the training, challenges that librarians anticipate in relation to the digital skills training).

For the third objective we developed a scenario for community meetings, which aimed at answering five key questions:

1. What digital skills and online content do youth and women in your community want?
2. How do most community members usually engage with the Internet (no access, mobile only, computers only, both mobile and computers)?
3. What is the best way for youth and women to participate in digital skills training and online learning (at the library, at home, on their mobile, etc.)?
4. How should we promote digital skills training and online learning to attract youth and women?
5. What would attendee expectations or recommendations be in relation to this project?

Type of training activity	Frequency of training	Average number of training hours per month	Average number of people per training	Expected results to be reached by the end of the project
Digital literacy training (face-to-face)	Once a month	4–6 hours	10	At least two hundred and fifty people will gain basic digital literacy skills or improve their existing skills
Mobile literacy training (face-to-face)	Twice a month	2–4 hours	5	At least two hundred and fifty people will gain basic digital literacy skills or improve their existing skills
Learning circles (face-to-face, using online materials)	Once a week for 6–8 weeks	4–6 hours	12	At least one hundred learners will attend online courses to access knowledge and information useful in their daily lives

Table 1: Training targets by type of training activities for participating libraries. Source: Author-created table

In addition to the above-mentioned questions, we had a goal of collecting geolocation data from each library and photos of the library building, to be used for increasing their visibility.

Data gathering

Trips to the Northern and Eastern regions started on March 1, 2021, with the Paidah Public Library, and ended on March 5, 2021, with the Uganda Development Community Library in Kamuli. This was followed by trips to the Western and Central regions that started on March 9 and ended on March 16. During this time the team managed to collect data from twenty libraries as well as run twenty-two community consultations with local youth and women. A total of 225 people were engaged via these meetings.

To capture information, the team used Kobotoolbox (<https://www.kobotoolbox.org/>), a free toolkit for collecting and managing data in challenging environments that is widely used in humanitarian emergencies. It was chosen because Kobotoolbox allows offline data collection, which is very handy in remote areas where internet connectivity is not always available. The tool also allowed the capture geolocation data, which was later used to produce a map of libraries participating in the “Digital literacy @your local library” project (see figure 2).

The most challenging aspect of the visits was time management, as the schedule was very time-intensive and it was not always easy to predict how much time was needed in each location because of factors like heavy traffic, bad roads, and others. This caused some alterations in the planned schedules.

Findings from Interviews with Librarians

In terms of infrastructure, we found that libraries have, on average, eight computers available for users. However, some of these computers are very old, have technical issues, or use outdated software, such that in reality many libraries only have four or five functioning computers. The internet connectivity is generally sufficient for the planned activities: twelve libraries reported having internet capable of streaming high-definition video, while the remaining eight libraries have moderate internet connectivity, sufficient to stream low-bandwidth video. However, libraries also reported frequent power outages, which negatively affect computer use and training activities.

At the time of assessment, five libraries did not have any digital training skills programs, while others primarily offered training on basic computer skills, Microsoft Office, and internet searching. Very few libraries were offering more diverse ICT related topics, such as digital marketing, video and audio editing, graphic design, etc. (see figure 3).

The assessment confirmed that most libraries have one or two staff members who are in charge of all library services. In most libraries, the training is done by assistant librarians or volunteers, while four libraries reported not having anyone to do the digital skills training. We observed that for basic digital skills training, many librarians were using training materials which were developed by EIFL and Maendeleo Foundation in 2014–2015, which had not been updated.

On average, the libraries train eight people per month, although only eight libraries require registration for the training participants. In terms of the topics people want to learn, librarians most frequently mentioned interest in searching for YouTube videos on crafts and agriculture, learning how to find online courses, using government e-services, searching and applying for jobs online, applying for scholarships, typing documents, creating presentations, and using internet search and email. Some users were also interested in more advanced

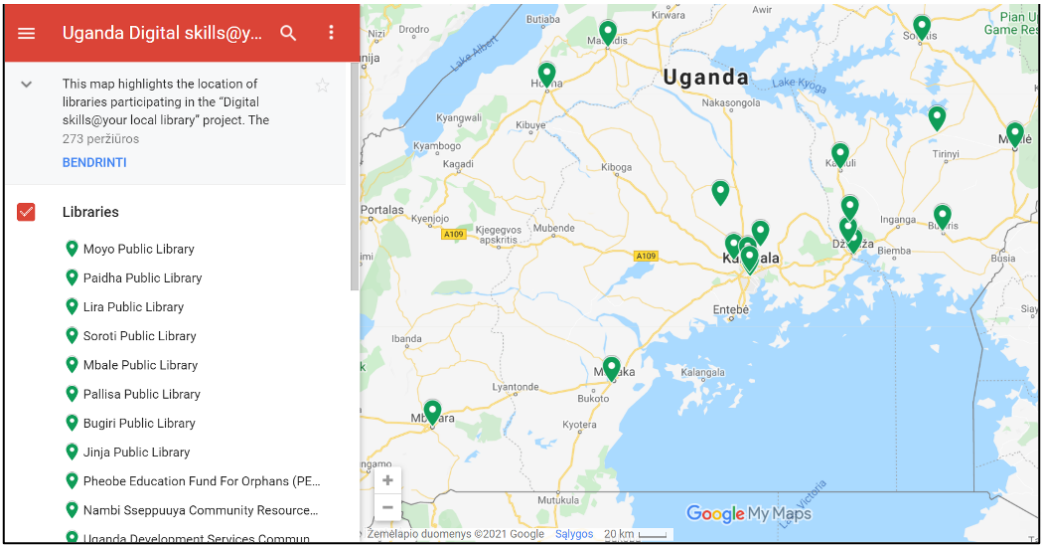


Figure 2. Map of participating public and community libraries. Source: Author-created map. URL: <https://bit.ly/3pNagxb>

computer skills such as accounting, website and graphic design, digital marketing, photo and video editing, programming, and coding.

Librarians also said that people have a strong interest in developing practical skills which would be useful in their daily lives, especially skills that could potentially bring income or other anticipated benefits. Examples of such skills include financial literacy and entrepreneurship, home management, parenting, dangers of drug abuse, sexual health, and vocational skills such as making door mats, soap, baking, fashion and design, cosmetology, communication, marketing and public speaking skills, and farming.

Findings from community consultations

From the community consultations we learned that about half of community members only have access to the internet through a mobile phone, while the other half can access the internet both through a mobile phone and a computer. In two communities people reported having no access to the internet, except for that provided by the library. Considering their limited access to the internet and the high cost of data, most participants expressed a preference to learn digital literacy skills in the library.

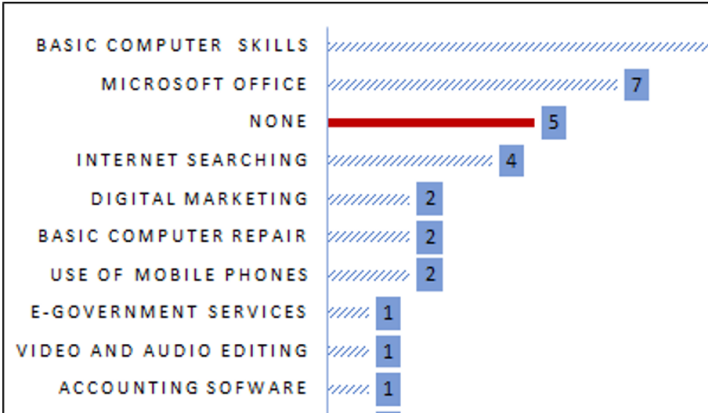


Figure 3. Current digital literacy programs in libraries. Source: Author-created figure

In terms of duration and frequency of digital literacy training, most people preferred to meet one to two times per week for up to two hours. Youth seem to have a bit more flexibility in terms of timing, while women have more responsibilities at home and therefore training for them has to be carefully coordinated with these responsibilities (see figure 4).



The best ways to promote digital learning would be community outreach, local media (TV/radio), youth and women's groups, flyers, banners, training in schools, engaging volunteers to train community members, social media, WhatsApp groups, church, and word of mouth.

In terms of topics, community responses were similar to the ones expressed by librarians. For technology-related skills, people wanted to learn basic computer skills, Microsoft Office, how to get the best use out of their mobile phone, Internet use and research, digital marketing, and how to access online learning courses. Young people expressed interest in more advanced ICT skills, such as video and audio editing, online safety, accounting, e-commerce, job seeking, web design, and programming, etc. (see figure 5).

Among other skills that are not directly related to technology, most people were interested in learning about practical skills, such as:

- Fashion design and hairdressing
- Handicrafts (beads, bags, etc.)
- Shoe making and tailoring
- Baking and cooking
- Farming (coffee, maize, poultry, rabbits, pineapples, etc.)
- Financial literacy
- Entrepreneurship
- STEM
- Reproductive health and sexual education
- English language
- Family counseling, domestic violence, parenting and motherhood
- Academic courses for students at all levels
- Leadership and public speaking
- First aid



Figure 4. Community meeting with local women in Mbarara public library. Source: Author

The COVID-19 lockdowns made some of the businesswomen in our community realize how important digital skills are. Without knowledge on how to access online resources they could not contact suppliers in the city, they now understand the need to learn new skills to adapt to a changing world.

As for expectations related to the project, both women and youth were hoping that it will improve their employability, help them start small businesses, teach them how to market and sell produce online, and ultimately improve their livelihood and standard of living. After the meeting, Marcy Akia, a librarian from Soroti Public Library, shared her observation:



Figure 5. Community meeting with youth and women in Masindi Public Library. Source: Source: Author

### From the assessment to the designing of a digital literacy program

The data collected during interviews with librarians and community meetings has provided insights for the development of a digital literacy training program for librarians, ensuring they are prepared to adapt and deliver meaningful digital skills training to their communities. In addition to the feedback collected in the meetings, the team observed that while about 70 percent of librarians have sufficient ICT skills, most need to learn how to teach.

The topics of interest expressed during the meetings became the focus of the training materials developed to help librarians deploy digital and mobile literacy curricula in their libraries. We also realized that people's needs and interests were diverse, so we approached the curricula as mini modules, which could be selected in accordance with the needs of a small group of people. We are also building a strategy on how to expand the current online course offerings to include more local content focused on the development of practical skills.

The community needs assessment also helped to identify active community members who might be brought on board as libraries start promoting the training among youth and women. Some of these community members might also be interested in becoming volunteers to help librarians run and then expand the training and facilitate online learning courses.

### Conclusions

The community needs assessment built a strong foundation for needs-based library service development, and engaged end-users from the very beginning, giving them ownership of the service and ensuring its relevance. It is also an effective community outreach strategy, creating enthusiasm and interest in upcoming new library services. A combination of quantitative and qualitative data collection methods allowed for both obtaining factual information and addressing questions around perceptions and expectations among community

members, identifying specific issues or problems they are facing, and how they see the library contributing to resolving these problems or issues.

For this project, the community needs assessment study provided in-depth insight into the preferences and expectations of the main project targets—youth and women—from multiple rural and urban localities. This first step in the project has already engaged community members and will ensure the success of the librarians’ future outreach efforts.

With relatively simple instruments and the dedicated effort of local partners, we were able to obtain a detailed picture of the situation in public and community libraries across the country related to ICT infrastructure and digital literacy training. Furthermore, we were able to identify strengths which would aid in the implementation of our project, such as a relatively large number of libraries who already have some experience in digital literacy training, sufficient internet connectivity in libraries, and interest and enthusiasm from the local community. We were also able to pin down some of the challenges which may affect project activities, such as problems with power supply and hardware, a lack of staff, and a lack of staff confidence in running digital literacy training. These findings will guide our next steps as we move forward with the implementation of this project.

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**Appendix 1. List of participating libraries**

1. Moyo Public Library
2. Paidha Public Library
3. Lira Public Library
4. Soroti Public Library
5. Mbale Public Library
6. Pallisa Public Library
7. Bugiri Public Library
8. Jinja Public Library
9. PEFO – Community Library-Jinja
10. Nambi Sseppuuya Community Resource Centre-Jinja
11. Uganda Development Services Community Library-Kamuli
12. Nakaseke Public Library
13. Masaka Public Library
14. Center for Youth Driven Development Initiatives (CFYDDI)
15. Wakiso Community Library
16. Kawempe Youth Center
17. Mummy Foundation Community Library
18. Masindi Public Library
19. Hoima Public Library
20. Bundibugyo community Library
21. Mbarara Public Library
22. Kabale Public Library
23. Nyarushaje Community Library
24. Nyaka Blue Lupin Community Library
25. National Library of Uganda





## ARTICLE

Christopher  
Marcum

University of San Diego

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# Characteristics of Effective Outreach as Perceived by Library Student Assistants

## ABSTRACT

This paper offers specific recommendations for effective academic library outreach that practitioners may consider as they develop and implement outreach initiatives at their institutions. It describes a methodology that can be replicated for similar case studies at other universities. It also contributes new knowledge to the subject of academic library outreach by reporting on the perceptions of library student assistants at a small liberal arts university in Southern California to gain insight into the kinds of outreach programming and communications students prefer and perceive as effective. This study used in-depth interviews to identify characteristics of effective outreach as perceived by library student assistants. Library student assistants are trained in access to and use of library resources and services and therefore make ideal informants for outreach librarians seeking to understand what students think about their outreach efforts, including programming and communications.

## KEYWORDS

Library Outreach, Library Marketing, Library Student Assistants, Perceptions, Library Communications

In 2018, I began developing an outreach plan for an academic library at a small private liberal arts university in Southern California. It occurred to me that input from students could be valuable to my planning efforts, and I began to consider ways to gather practical information from students regarding how the library could best reach them. My initial questions included: What kinds of outreach would students be interested in? Did they prefer campus events that were academic or social? What kinds of events did they already attend on campus, and why? How could I effectively promote library outreach efforts to them? I had a goal: to gather information on what university students think characterizes effective library outreach. I also had two problems. First, I could not find any information on what students thought about library outreach. Our library had no data on what our students thought, and the literature on library outreach does not speak to the question of what students think about outreach. My second problem was that many students I was hoping to reach through outreach initiatives likely knew very little about the library and certainly had no significant experience with library outreach. How could I survey a representative sample of students about something they knew nothing about and expect to get meaningful results? To address both problems, I decided to conduct in-depth interviews with our library student assistants and report my findings on the question, "What are the characteristics of effective outreach as identified by library student assistants?" Library student

assistants are a particularly well-informed subset of any university's student population regarding questions related to the library, because they are trained in the use of and access to library resources and services and therefore make ideal informants when seeking to understand what students think about library outreach. Their answers to my questions would be more informed than the general student population because, as library student assistants, they have knowledge of the library that most students do not have. I concluded that I would get more meaningful data from a census of this informed subset of our student population than I would from a random or representative sample of the student body. I conducted a census of all student assistants who had worked in the library for at least two years. Thirteen student assistants met these criteria, and I interviewed all thirteen as "student experts" to identify characteristics of effective library outreach.

The research presented here offers specific recommendations for successful academic library outreach that practitioners may consider as they develop and implement outreach initiatives at their own institutions. It also describes a methodology that can be replicated for similar case studies at other universities. While this study seeks to better understand what students at one institution think characterizes effective library outreach, future studies may consider the impact of implementing the ideas that students shared to confirm or disconfirm the effectiveness of the ideas identified by study participants.

For the purpose of this study, "outreach" is defined as library activities—including displays, events, and communications—which encourage non-library users to make use of library resources and services. "Effective outreach" is defined as any deliberate activities that successfully bring people to the library and ultimately increase the use of library resources and services. For the purposes of this study, participants were asked to distinguish between library instruction activities (such as information literacy instruction) and outreach activities.

This paper is divided into five parts. Part One, the introduction, outlines the problems the study addresses, describes the significance of the research, and lays out definitions. Part Two reviews the literature to date about library student assistants and library outreach and contextualizes this study's place in the literature. Part Three describes my research methodology, including the tools required, and limitations of the study. Part Four discusses my findings on the question "What are the characteristics of effective outreach as perceived by library student assistants?" The characteristics discussed are: promotion, incentives, timing, student involvement, and intangibles (such as "unique" and "modern"). Part Five summarizes my findings and offers concrete recommendations for practitioners on the basis of the findings of this study.

## Literature Review

My review of the literature on library outreach services and library student assistants, including their perceptions of library resources and services, finds no studies that identify characteristics of effective outreach as perceived by library student assistants or any other student populations. Moreover, it finds no studies reporting on general perceptions of library outreach in any student populations. This study addresses this gap in the literature by reporting on the perceptions of students at a small liberal arts university in Southern California

“What kinds of outreach would students be interested in? Did they prefer campus events that were academic or social? What kinds of events did they already attend on campus, and why? How could I effectively promote library outreach efforts to them?”

with the goal of providing insights into the kinds of outreach programing and communications students prefer and perceive as successful.

The existing literature on library student assistants and outreach can be divided into four categories. The first is literature on how library student assistants are used to develop and deploy library outreach. This includes using students to develop and deploy library programs, communications, and marketing materials which promote library resources and services. Literature in this category also reports on library programs that train students to engage with other students in various ways, including through instruction in and promotion of library resources and services, and evaluates these peer-to-peer interactions. In 2007, Millet and Chamberlain (95–105) reported on the use of campus peer tutors to market library resources, including the benefits of word-of-mouth marketing to students. In 2009, Betz, Brown Barberi, and Langendorfer (250) reported on the use of student ambassadors to promote and offer instruction on the use of specific library databases. A 2011 study by Miller reported on the student liaison program at Eastern Washington University (EWU). The program was designed to enhance the library's engagement with students at EWU with goals to improve communications with the study body, articulate student perspectives on library services, and increase student participation in library programs (Miller 2011, 1). In 2017, Meyer and Torreano reported on Grand Valley State University's use of library student assistants to provide peer research consultations and serve as user experience assistants tasked with engaging students at front line service points and gathering data on how students are using the library (Meyer and Torreano 2017, 54).

Also in 2017, Barnes reported on peer marketing at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Libraries (UNL), reporting increased student engagement with the library when student assistants, called "peer guides," staffed booths and noted that input and assistance from peer guides increased engagement with the library's social media platforms (Barnes 2017, 136–137). In 2019, Hines, Elrod, Huet, Ewing, and Freund (64) described their collaboration with students in a public relations class at the University of Florida to create strategies to better market library services to students. The authors concluded that the partnership "did yield multiple strategies and insights not previously considered by library staff and successfully reenergized marketing and public relations efforts for both branches." (Hines et al. 2019, 75). While this study, in examining student ideas for improving library marketing came closest to the questions addressed in my research, my study contributes an alternative perspective in terms of focus, population, and methodology. I used in-depth interviews (IDIs) rather than focus groups, spoke with students informed on library outreach rather than public relations, and focused on outreach rather than marketing. Working with library student assistants (who are well-informed regarding library resources and services but enrolled in a variety of degree programs) thus contributes a unique perspective on the question of student perceptions of effective outreach, including marketing.

The second subset of relevant literature assesses the kinds of communications and services students prefer. In 2017, Stvilia and Gibradze (257) surveyed 104 undergraduates at a large research university and reported that study support services, as well as access to information and computer resources, were the most important services the library offered. Participating students also reported that social media postings related to library operations, study support services, and library events were the most useful (Stvilia and Gibradze 2017, 257). In 2018, Howard, Huber, Carter, and Moore (11) shared findings on the kinds of social media platforms that students at Purdue University use, the platforms students want the library to use, and the kinds of library social media content students

wanted to see; they found that students used Facebook, YouTube, and Snapchat more than other platforms.

The third category is studies on student perceptions of academic libraries generally, including their perceptions of library spaces, of services other than outreach—including interlibrary loan and research help—and of library instruction resources (such as online tutorials, one-shots, and library guides). Butler and Byrd's 2015 study asked students to complete a survey sharing their perspectives on the face-to-face consultations they received (Butler and Byrd 2016, 83). Similarly, the 2017 study by McCartin, Innacchione, and Evans (242) examined students' perceptions of how successfully a course that integrated information literacy instruction improved their research and writing. The 2017 ethnographic study by Tomlin, Tewell, Mullins, and Dent (631) used observations, surveys, and IDIs to gain insights into how students use the library for academic research. Such studies have also focused on specific groups, such as students from specific ethnic and cultural backgrounds (Long 2011, 504–511) and non-student populations such as faculty and staff (Faulk 2018, 193–196). A recent study published in 2019 shares findings on how library professionals perceive outreach and instruction for transfer students in the state of Colorado (Roberts, Welsh, and Dudek 2019, 94).

Finally, there is a related body of literature on how student assistants perceive their work in libraries. Benjamin and McDevitt's study examines students' perceptions of the challenges and benefits of working as library student assistants (2018, 262). The 2016 study by Melilli, Mitola, and Hunsacker (430) demonstrated that students perceive value in the opportunities that working in the library provides for developing life skills and professional and academic competencies.

## Methodology

I chose IDIs as my data-gathering methodology because the current literature indicates that this is the best methodology for gaining insight into what a specific group of people thinks about some aspect of the human experience, including their perceptions, beliefs, interpretations, and motivations (Guest, Namey, and Mitchell 2013). To ensure that my data came from well-informed students, I conducted a census of all our library student assistants with at least two years of experience working in Access and Outreach Services (a total of thirteen students). Current research demonstrates that six to eight participants is an adequate sample to ensure meaningful results when analyzing IDIs (Guest, Namey, and McKenna 2017, 3–22). I successfully recruited all thirteen students to participate and offered Amazon gift cards as an incentive. I developed, piloted, and revised an interview guide, and used it to conduct IDIs to gather information on what participating students thought characterized effective outreach. To facilitate conversation about these characteristics and help corroborate findings, I required interviewees to participate in three listing exercises to identify and rank: outreach events they believed would be successful, communication channels they believed would be most effective in reaching university students, and characteristics of effective outreach. I used an audio recorder to create digital audio files of all the interviews and the audio transcription service TranscribeMe to transcribe the audio recordings. The data I gathered was stripped of personal identifiers, coded, and then analyzed for themes. To ensure intercoder reliability, I worked with a colleague to code the interviews independently. We then came together to agree on a final code based on our independent work. I used the qualitative data analysis program Delv to analyze the transcripts and identify the characteristics discussed in my results. I also used Delv to analyze the list created by interviewees. I used Microsoft



Excel to conduct statistical analysis of each list. I also gathered demographic data from participants (age, ethnicities, and majors) to determine the degree to which my census of student assistants was representative of the general student population and used Microsoft Excel to analyze that data.

This study has three noteworthy limitations. First, the students interviewed were not representative of my university's demographics. However, the need to ensure that the data came from informed library users was critical and had to be balanced with the goal of studying a group that constituted a representative sample of the entire student population. For example, my study was twenty-three percent male while the university's undergraduate population at the time was forty-five percent male (University of San Diego, 2019). Likewise, twenty-three percent of participants identified as Asian with only about seven percent of the university's undergraduate population identifying as such. Also, twenty-three percent of participants identified as White compared to forty-nine percent of the university's undergraduates, and no study participants identified as American Indian or Alaska Native or as Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, though the university's undergraduate population of each group is 0.4 percent. Our university's undergraduate student body is fifteen percent Hispanic, and twenty-two percent of participants identified as Hispanic (University of San Diego, 2019). That said, the results of this study suggest that I got more meaningful data from a census of an informed subset of students than I would have from a random or representative sample of our general student population.

While the students interviewed had different experiences working in the library, my findings show that they all played some role in our outreach efforts during their time as library student assistants and that all had more knowledge of library resources and services than they would have had they not worked for the library. A second limitation was the potential for conflicts of interest concerning participation in the study. Since interviewees were employees of the library, concerns about conflicts needed to be addressed, and two things were done to mitigate the potential for conflicts of interest.

First, I worked cooperatively with the library's Federal Work-Study Program coordinator to ensure that I was not assigned to supervise any of the students eligible to participate in the study during the semester in which the data was gathered (Spring 2019). This ensured that I was not responsible for evaluating the work performance of any potential participants. Second, I created a concise but thorough consent form explaining that participation was voluntary and that the decision whether or not to participate would not affect a participant's employment status. The consent form included clear instructions on how to withdraw from the study at any time. A third limitation is that this data was gathered in the spring of 2019 so it is unclear how the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 may have changed students' perceptions of library outreach since that outbreak. That said, this paper's findings and conclusions reveal general characteristics of effective outreach as identified by student assistants that should have long term applicability.

### Findings

Findings reveal the extent of participants' knowledge and experience with library outreach and demonstrate that they are ideal informants when seeking to understand what students think about library outreach. Findings

reveal that the two most important characteristics for effective outreach as perceived by library student assistants are "well-promoted" and "incentivized." Findings suggest that outreach events should combine multiple modes of communication to be considered well-promoted and should combine various types of incentives to ensure that students receive something they value. These could include material incentives—such as extra credit and food—or non-material incentives—such as the opportunity to socialize with friends and network with professionals. By well-promoted, students mean that they see and hear communications about the outreach in multiple ways, many times, over many weeks. Other characteristics of effective outreach identified by student assistants included timing, student involvement, and a loose collection of intangible characteristics such as "fun," "unique," and "modern."

**Students as Experts.** Three characteristics of library student assistants show that they are ideal informants when seeking to understand what students think about effective library outreach: the amount of experience each participant has working for the library, the experience they have participating in library outreach specifically, and positive changes in their perceptions of the library after being trained in use of and access to library resources.

All study participants reported having worked for the library for at least twenty-four months, with the longest-serving student reporting forty-eight months of service. One hundred percent of participating students reported experience assisting with library outreach. The outreach events most frequently supported by the student participants were the library's Annual Banned Books Week events, including an interactive display and our "Blind Date with a Banned Book" event (which invites students to select a book wrapped as a present and open it to reveal the title), and our participation in a campus orientation event each semester. Eight of the thirteen reported that they had no perceptions of the library before they became student assistants; all thirteen indicated that their current perception of the library was positive, with eleven of thirteen stating that it had changed in a positive way since becoming student assistants. The number one cause students gave for their change in perception, noted by seven of thirteen, was that they knew more about library resources and services since becoming a student assistant. One participant explained how their perception of the library had changed since becoming a library student assistant thus: "When I first arrived, I just assumed that this was a place people just went to study for tests . . . But now, it just has become a part of my life. [I have] been able to learn on my own and improve my grades here. Utilize the resources efficiently. Not knowing about the resources, someone just goes to Amazon and orders the book . . ." (interviewee 13, in discussion with the author, 2019). Another participant explained why their perception had changed since becoming an assistant, saying: "I guess I've gotten to see the other sides of it. Like, there's so much more than just coming to study here. . . . the [Associated Student Government] reserves books, and even their online reserves. But that's something that, maybe if I didn't work here, I wouldn't really know about it or use as often" (interviewee 3, in discussion with the author, 2019). Another student shared how being an assistant had enhanced their knowledge of library services: "There's a lot of resources that people don't know about that I think is very useful, but I try to promote that when I'm not at work. I try to tell people like, 'Hey, you can go to the library and find stuff. You don't have to stress about this'" (interviewee 8, in discussion with the author, 2019).

**Well-Promoted.** Analysis of the interview transcripts revealed that "well-promoted" is the most important characteristic of effective outreach as perceived by library student assistants. As one student explained: "If no one hears about it, no is going to go" (interviewee 10, in discussion with the author,

“Findings reveal that the two most important characteristics for effective outreach as perceived by library student assistants are “well-promoted” and “incentivized.””

2019). By “well-promoted,” students meant that they saw or heard information about the outreach initiative in multiple places, multiple times, and over a few weeks. In describing the top characteristic on their list, one interviewee stated, “I said successful marketing and under that, something that’s well-posted or

Copley Outreach Events Participation	Years of Experience in Library (Months)	Change in Perception
Campus Orientation, Banned Books events	36	no
Movie Nights, Banned Book	30	yes
Movie night, Banned Book, APA - MLA workshop	48	yes
Banned Book	42	yes
Movie night, Banned Book	42	yes
Finals Week	48	yes
Finals week, Banned Book	48	yes
Campus Orientation, Banned Book	30	yes
Banned Book	36	yes
Campus Orientation, Finals week	24	yes
Campus Orientation, Finals week	24	no
Campus Orientation, Finals week	36	yes
Campus Orientation, Movie night	36	yes

Table 1. Library outreach events interviewees participated in as library student assistants, years of experience as library student assistants, and whether interviewees' perceptions of the library changed because of working in the library.



Figure 1. Word cloud with characteristics of effective outreach identified in the coded listing exercise.

well-advertised across different areas, so social media and posters. And then the second point I said is that it's spoken about, so something that people have heard either from their friends or tabling in a different way they're hearing about something and not just reading about it" (interviewee 11, in discussion with the author, 2019). This interviewee makes clear that to be well-promoted, outreach needs to reach students via multiple communications channels, especially word of mouth. When asked if outreach that was relevant to their coursework was an important factor, one participant instead highlighted the importance of outreach being well-promoted: "No. Not even relevant to my coursework. It's just that I'd be interested in [it], but also it's well-marketed. That continuously seeing it around campus in my emails, that would make you think like, 'Oh, what's this thing that I keep seeing? Maybe it's worth checking it out'" (interviewee 2, in discussion with the author, 2019).

As part of our discussions on what students think characterizes effective outreach, participants were asked to create lists of preferred characteristics and communication channels. When asked to prioritize their characteristics lists, several participants noted marketing or something similar, which I coded as “well-promoted.” Analysis of the students’ priority lists of characteristics found that ten of thirteen participants included some version of “well-promoted” as a characteristic of effective outreach. Interviewee 3 explained: “I think the advertisement or the marketing of the events is the most important” (interviewee 2, in discussion with the author, 2019)” Analysis of the lists revealed that well-promoted had an average (mode) priority rank of one.

Analysis of students' priority lists of communication channels showed that students believe the best way to make sure they hear about an event is to communicate it via email, word of mouth from friends and professors, social media, and well-designed and well-placed signage.

*Email.* Participants' priority lists show that they believe email is the most effective way to communicate with students about library outreach. All thirteen participants listed email, and it was ranked number one for effectiveness more than any other channel: eight participants ranked it number one, four participants ranked it two, and one ranked it three. Email also topped communication channels in my analysis of the transcripts. One interviewee summed up the value of email: "Because I always check my emails. If there's something important, I know that it's going to show up in my email" (interviewee 2, in discussion with the author, 2019). Another articulated why they felt email was an effective way to reach students saying: "we're constantly checking it for any notifications from Blackboard or teachers" (interviewee 1, in discussion with the author, 2019). A third participant discussed email as their top choice for university communications stating: "I think the main one is in emails, especially newsletters. Different kinds of centers send a newsletter that has all of the events, and that's where I find most of my information" (interviewee 3, in discussion with the author, 2019).

*Word of Mouth.* Participant lists reveal that word of mouth and social media are tied for the second most effective way to communicate with students. What sets these channels apart in the listing exercise is that the average (mode) ranking for social media among the thirteen lists was two, and word of mouth had an average of four. Twelve of thirteen participants listed word of mouth, with eleven specifying word of mouth from their peers and five listing word of mouth from professors. Of the five participants who listed professors, four also included peers. Only one did not list word of mouth as a priority communication channel.

The transcripts reveal that word of mouth was firmly ahead of social media in terms of effectiveness and suggest why. Students most often specified that



word of mouth from their fellow students was the most powerful way to reach them. One student explained: “If like a friend reaches out to me and invites me or says, ‘Hey, I heard about this event,’ I think that would definitely convince me more than flyers, posters, or emails” (interviewee 3, in discussion with the author, 2019). When asked how they had heard about an event they described as successful, another student explained, “It was through my friend. Because her professor was speaking at one of the events for the [Communications] Department and I found out through her” (interviewee 1, in discussion with the author, 2019) Another student summed up the value of word of mouth from friends this way: “But, word-of-mouth, I feel like is usually the most effective . . . just because, when you hear people who say it through word-of-mouth, it’s usually friends. So you kind of [look?]. I don’t know. You have more of a personal connection with it, with the certain event that they’re telling you [about]” (interviewee 7, in discussion with the author, 2019). Word of mouth through professors was also noted as an effective way to reach students. When asked what made an event a success, the student stated: “I think there was a lot of professors there at the event. And I’m pretty sure those same professors told their classrooms about it” (interviewee 3, in discussion with the author, 2019). Another student explained that they put professors as a top way to learn about library outreach initiatives because “they have a very good influence on the students” (interviewee 2, in discussion with the author, 2019). When asked if they were more likely to attend an event that they heard about through word of mouth, interviewee 11 said: “absolutely” (interviewee 11, in discussion with the author, 2019).

**Social Media.** Analysis of the interview transcripts show that social media is an important tool for communicating with students but it is firmly behind word of mouth and email. One student explained: “I feel Facebook is dying, especially with the younger generation. I notice people don’t really use Facebook that often. They kind of just use it for its messaging capabilities” (interviewee 5, in discussion with the author, 2019). Another student said of Instagram: “I think it’s a good way to reach students if you were to post stories on the [library’s Instagram] because those are on a day-to-day basis. And you could post one month ahead of time, advertising like: ‘Save the date. This is the event’” (interviewee 9, in discussion with the author, 2019). The same student noted that Instagram offers opportunities to make sure outreach is seen multiple times by students stating, “And if Instagram is posting it several times and they see it a few different times—I personally need that reminder” (Interviewee 9, in discussion with the author, 2019). Like word of mouth, twelve of thirteen participants listed social media, with some distinguishing between specific platforms: ten participants specified Instagram for social media, four participants specified Facebook, and one specified Twitter, suggesting that Instagram is the best platform to reach students.

**Signage.** Students’ priority lists reveal that signage, including posters and flyers, is the fourth best way to communicate with them about library outreach, with eleven of thirteen participants listing it. Likewise, analysis of interview transcripts regarding communications suggests that signage which is both well-designed and well-placed is one of the top ways to communicate effectively with students about outreach. One interviewee explained: “So they’re super easy to just read and then if they’re interesting, or if the poster itself is nice, and they just caught your attention” (interviewee 3, in discussion with the author, 2019). Students consistently mentioned that ubiquity of posters and flyers is important to successful marketing. As one student put it: “And definitely posters. In the bathrooms, if I’m using the restroom and I see them, I stop and look at them, take pictures of them if I’m interested. And they’re all over

campus. So it’s like you really can’t miss them” (interviewee 1, in discussion with the author, 2019). Several students noted that placing posters and flyers in high-traffic and high-visibility areas was important. One participant explained: “And fliers would be—a huge factor would be the tactical way you place it, where you’re going to post it or how big, how small”

(interviewee 2, in discussion with the author, 2019). The same student elaborated on the importance of location, explaining: “But also where students are frequently in. I guess . . . somewhere in the [University Center] where students pass by and would see those standing fliers” (interviewee 2, in discussion with the author, 2019). Rounding out the top five on the list was the university’s website, with four participants noting it as a place they get information about events.

**Incentivized.** Analysis of the interview transcripts revealed that providing material and non-material incentives is a crucial characteristic of effective outreach, second only to making sure people know about outreach activities. Likewise, participants’ priority list of outreach characteristics and events corroborated that incentives ranked well ahead of lower rated characteristics, including timing and student involvement. Incentives are anything that the student values.

The term “non-material incentives” describes a category in which students come away from an outreach activity with something valuable but difficult to quantify, such as opportunities to network with professionals in their chosen field or engage with members of a shared community. The most commonly mentioned non-material incentives needed to make outreach successful were opportunities to socialize with friends and peers and to learn something outside of the classroom, especially if it is relevant to their career interest, and includes less tangible characteristics such as being interactive or fun. One interviewee explained why their favorite event on campus was so successful: “I think community . . . Being able to go somewhere and meet other people with your same interests” (interviewee 10, in discussion with the author, 2019). Another participant explained, “I think especially here, on a college campus, people want that social aspect where they get away from that but they also want to come away learning something” (interviewee 1, in discussion with the author, 2019). The same student explained why they thought the most successful event they had attended on campus was so effective saying, “It’s, yeah, a very social event. It’s basically a party and you’re just hanging out with people that look like you. It’s welcome to everyone, but you see a lot of people from the Latin community go and have fun. They have tacos, non-alcoholic beverages. They have a piñata and music . . . It’s just a chance to just relax and hang out with all

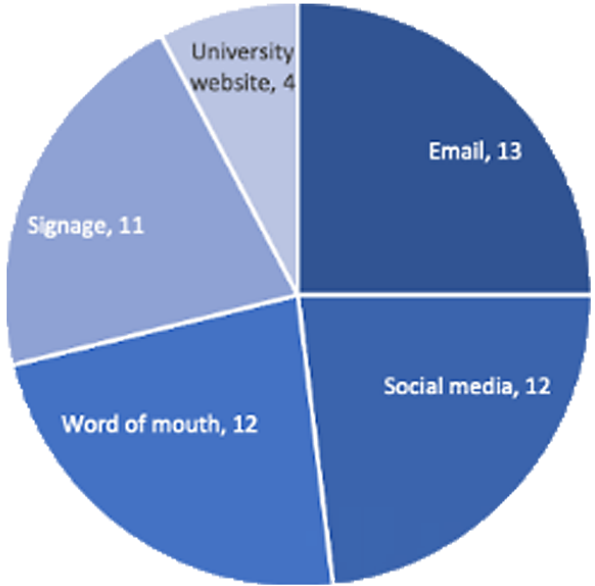


Figure 2. Modes of communication important to effective outreach, from coded list.

your friends” (interviewee 1, in discussion with the author, 2019). Interviewee nine summed up the value of an event combining material incentives with less tangible characteristics such as “useful” saying: “useful in terms of useful for my college experience or maybe after graduation, or looking for jobs or researching for classes or anything like that. And then, also beneficial, so free food, raffles, future benefits, anything like that” (interviewee 9, in discussion with the author, 2019).

Another student asked to comment on what they thought was the most successful event they had attended on campus explained: “They have food and they have someone who’s informed about the topic. And they have student leaders or two of the student workers, one of the grad assistants, and then one regular undergrad student, just facilitate the conversation, ask people to speak to one another about it” (interviewee 4, in discussion with the author, 2019). In this instance, the student notes a combination of incentives and characteristics: opportunities to learn something and to socialize and network with friends and peers are important, but the characteristic of timing in terms of frequency and the characteristic of student involvement in facilitating the event are also noteworthy. When asked about their favorite educational events on campus, one student explained that the networking opportunities provided by the accounting club were the most successful, saying: “What makes them good and attractive for students, and interesting, is that the professionals are the ones presenting. And they have incentives to be there just to have facial recognition [with] the people that I’ll eventually interview with or meet in my career” (interviewee 2, in discussion with the author, 2019). Another student, describing an educational event on campus they thought was particularly effective, highlighted networking opportunities as a key reason. They explained, “So the Career Development Center, they find companies in a city and then they bring their students up there to talk to professionals in the company and have networking opportunities and they can just learn more about their company and ask them all sorts of questions. And it really applied to me because I’m graduating soon, so it really helped” (interviewee 7, in discussion with the author, 2019).

The most common material incentives students noted were free food and the opportunity to earn extra credit or points toward completing career readiness programs required by their program. The word “food” appeared 155 times across nine of the thirteen interviews, and some reference to extra credit or career program points appeared sixteen times across seven of thirteen interviews. Explaining why a recent event they attended was successful, one student mentioned that in addition to the event featuring a well-known celebrity, “It was also extra credit for some people, so a lot of people went just for that reason” (interviewee 8, in discussion with the author, 2019). Another highlighted a combination of material incentives: “A couple months ago, I attended this international speaker series. . . . And we got provided lunch and dessert, and I got a [career readiness] point” (interviewee 13, in discussion with the author, 2019). Although food was mentioned more than any other material incentive, students usually paired it with another incentive when talking about successful events they had attended. Students stressed that food was an important motivator for attending events but usually not the sole reason. Interviewee nine explained: “If the event has food, I’m more likely to go if it’s something that I’m on the fence about, or if it’s something that offers like a [career readiness] point . . . I’m more likely to go than an event that doesn’t” (interviewee 9, in discussion with the author, 2019). When asked why they attend events on campus, another student said, “If there’s free food. If I think

it could help me. I think that’s probably it” (interviewee 13, in discussion with the author, 2019).

Another student highlighted material incentives as a key characteristic they thought would make their idea for a finals week giveaway effective in bringing students to the library saying: “This can go for either caffeine beverages or food. I want to say that maybe the first x amount of people in the library during the first 24 hours during finals, they can get a free item or something, whether it’s like a food meal or if it’s like first 100 students get a free year of In N Out” (interviewee 6, in discussion with the author, 2019). When asked why they attended a recent event on campus, interviewee five said, “Because they were giving away free stuff” (interviewee 5, in discussion with the author, 2019).

The campus event most frequently cited by students as successful is hosted annually by a campus organization. Many students noted that the fact that it was annual was important, but interviewee eight summed up best the incentives most identified as important for making this effective outreach when they explained: “I liked the music. I liked the food. A lot of my friends go because a lot of my friends are people of color, so they’re interested in those kind of events. And it’s fun” (interviewee 8, in discussion with the author, 2019). Interviewee four summed up incentives to make a campus event successful as follows: “rewarding can be anything from people feeling as if they learned something that’s rewarding to them in terms of, ‘I feel like I just expanded my own sense of knowledge.’ Or rewarding can literally mean something tangible” (interviewee 4, in discussion with the author, 2019).

The listing exercise for characteristics of effective outreach corroborated students’ perception of incentives as very important to effective outreach. Eleven of thirteen participants listed some kind of non-material incentive, nine of thirteen listed some kind of material incentive, and seven of thirteen listed both. Twelve of thirteen participants listed some kind of incentive as a key characteristic of effective outreach. The average (mode) priority rank for non-material incentives was two and for material incentives four.

**Student Involvement.** Analysis of the transcripts revealed that student assistants believe involving students in planning, marketing, and executing outreach events is a key characteristic of effective outreach. Doing so incentivizes other students to participate by increasing opportunities to network and socialize with the students assisting with the outreach and provides opportunities to ensure it is well-promoted through word of mouth generated by the students helping with the initiative. When asked to describe the kinds of events that interest them, one student explained: “Definitely, if I know other people that are my friends are going too. If it’s put on or someone I know helped plan this event and then if it’s more social than educational” (interviewee 1, in discussion with the author, 2019). When asked why student involvement was key to their interest in events, the same student explained: “Because I think for events that I’ve seen on campus, when they’re like, ‘Those students that are heavily involved–’ and you know of these students, or you have a personal relationship with them, you’re kind of more invested in . . . showing up for them, and they’ll do the same for you” (interviewee 1, in discussion with the author, 2019). When discussing their experience helping the library with outreach, students were asked to comment on how we might best use student assistants for outreach. Interviewee nine summed up the value of student involvement explaining, “We would probably know what students like to see, what students want or would actually show up to. So I think even setting up the displays within the library, it’s more helpful to have a student do that, maybe than somebody who is older because I would be more drawn to something that has maybe like pop culture references or funny things . . . and



then I would be more likely to read it or go to the event or talk to whoever is in charge” (interviewee 9, in discussion with the author, 2019). Another participant cited student involvement as a key reason they thought their favorite campus event (an annual drag show) was so successful. They explained, “So I think that’s also an annual event that the LGBTQ-plus community, they run it, and I really like it . . . having people come together in one space that’s really openly supportive of marginalized communities, it was really cool. And just seeing the performances too. It was fun. Yeah, and seeing student performers perform . . . (interviewee 7, in discussion with the author, 2019).

Student involvement was less frequently noted in the listing exercises, with only three of thirteen participants listing it. Nevertheless, its prevalence in the transcripts, in combination with what students said about incentives (including opportunities to socialize with friends) and word of mouth as critical to well-promoted outreach, this study’s findings firmly situates student involvement among the most important characteristics of effective outreach as perceived by library student assistants.

**Timing.** Students frequently mentioned timing as an important characteristic of effective outreach and most often referred to finding a time of day that did not conflict with classes and other regular campus activities. Students also mentioned timing in terms of frequency, especially annual events, as well as timing in terms of duration of events, especially their being shorter or asynchronous to accommodate busy schedules. In discussing their rankings, one student said, “So number four I put location and time. I think keeping that in mind, having something that you know people will be able to show up with that doesn’t really conflict with their schedules. So I know here people definitely-- good outreach here is done in the afternoon or during dead hours” (interviewee 1, in discussion with the author, 2019). When asked about their priority list of characteristics, another student explained, “The third big thing is the time of the day that it’s occurring. . . . Dead hours are a great time to do something or later in the night, I guess like maybe 6 o’clock” (interviewee 11, in discussion with the author, 2019). Another said, “So I think the most successful ones are the ones that have food, are quick and maybe don’t interfere with a lot of other stuff” (interviewee 4, in discussion with the author, 2019). When asked why they do not attend events on campus, the same student explained: “For me, it’s just time constraint” (interviewee 4, in discussion with the author, 2019).

**Intangible Characteristics.** Finally, intangible characteristics such as “fun,” “exciting,” and “unique,” were cited by students as important characteristics for effective outreach. Although analysis of the transcripts did not

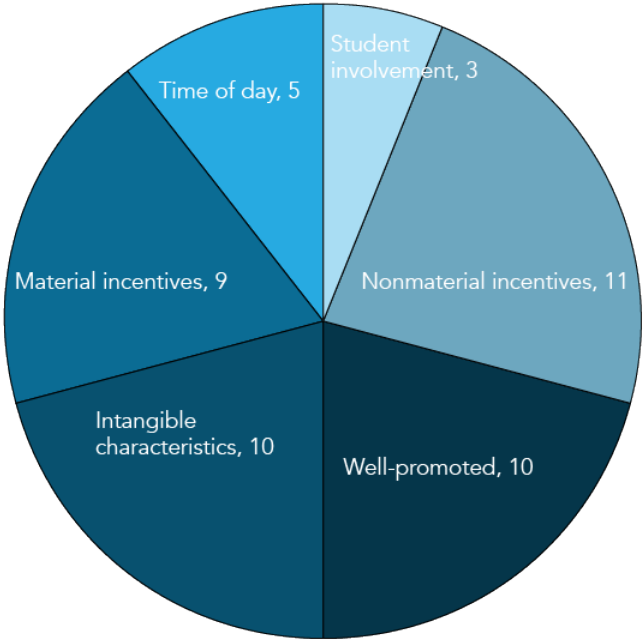


Figure 3.  
Characteristics of effective outreach from coded lists.

reveal insights into exactly what students mean by characteristics like “fun” and “unique,” these less tangible characteristics appear repeatedly throughout the interviews, with “fun” taking the top spot. The word “fun” shows up 120 times across ten of the thirteen interviews and is listed as a characteristic of effective outreach on five of thirteen priority lists of characteristics. “Unique” appears thirty times across eight interviews and “exciting” appears thirty times over seven interviews. Overall, ten of thirteen participants included at least one intangible characteristic.

Characteristic	Average Rank (Mode)
Well-promoted	1
Intangible characteristics	3
Material incentives	4
Non-material incentives	2
Student involvement	5
Time of day	5

Table 2. Average rankings of characteristics of effective outreach from coded lists.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study used IDIs to reveal what a well-informed subset of university students believe characterizes effective library outreach. Findings suggest that effective outreach is well-promoted, provides material and non-material incentives to participate, and is well timed to avoid conflicts with class and extracurricular activities. Findings also show that library student assistants believe effective outreach includes student participation in the planning, marketing, and execution of outreach, and intangible characteristics (such as fun, unique, and exciting) are important. This study also highlights library student assistant opinions on effective modes of communicating with students to ensure outreach is well-promoted: these include email, word of mouth, social media, and well-designed and well-placed signage. Future studies could examine if any of the characteristics identified may be more effective than others and determine what combination of characteristics might be most effective. Future studies may also define and assess the effectiveness of the most common intangible characteristics students identified including fun, exciting, and unique. On the basis of these findings, the author recommends the following:

1. Promote early and often: participants believe that promoting outreach in many ways over many weeks is essential to success. Combining modes of communication including email, word of mouth, social media, and signage is recommended.
2. Provide incentives: a combination of material and non-material incentives is recommended.
3. Develop a team of outreach student assistants: interviewees consistently noted that hearing about library outreach from fellow students was an effective way to reach them. They also made it clear that they attended events when they or a friend played a role in planning or facilitating the event in some way.
4. Consider timing: not just your academic calendar and class schedules, but also frequency and duration. Annual events or biannual events lend

- themselves to effective word-of-mouth marketing. Shorter events tend to be more appealing to busy students.
5. Incorporate less tangible characteristics: intangible characteristics that appeal to your target audience are important. Make it unique, fun, engaging, or relevant to a particular community on campus.

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## ARTICLE

John M. Jackson  
Ray Andrade  
Carol Raby  
Rhonda Rosen

Loyola Marymount  
University

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# Apples and Oranges: An Indicator for Assessing the Relative Impact of Library Events

## ABSTRACT

This article details one library's attempt to create a simple assessment method for evaluating the relative engagement of program attendees across a variety of events. The indicator—a combination of perceived level of engagement and calculated level of certainty—can be used alongside other metrics to give a fuller view of the overall impact of library programming. By conducting this study, the authors created a method for quickly assessing and prioritizing the most and least impactful events within a particular set.

## KEYWORDS

Programming, Assessment, Visualizations, Outreach, Surveys

It is a well-worn trope within professional LIS literature that library outreach is difficult to assess. Like comparing apples to oranges, the variability of event inputs, outcomes, and measures of engagement make it seemingly impossible to evaluate the overall success of a library's outreach work. Authors such as Farrell and Mastel (2016); LeMire, Graves, Farrell, and Mastel (2018); and Diaz (2019) have organized and categorized various types of library outreach, thus mapping out the landscape, but a universal assessment method still eludes practitioners.

Simply put, the goal of library outreach is to create engagement with and within the library. Therein lies a substantial problem with assessing library outreach: the quality and character of engagement at one event may not be comparable to the quality and character of engagement at another event. For the purposes of this study, the amount and quality of an individual's engagement during a library event does not matter as much as whether or not engagement is simply present. A positive, non-zero marker of engagement is sufficient for our purposes, thus making it possible to compare one event to another, quantitatively. This study outlines our attempt at creating an "apples to oranges" method of comparison across a wide range of library programs, providing a way to measure relative engagement across multiple events. This simple indicator—a combination of overall level of engagement with a level of certainty—can be used alongside other metrics to give a fuller view of the overall impact of library programming.

The William H. Hannon Library at Loyola Marymount University (LMU) serves a campus of 6,564 undergraduate students and 1,869 graduate students (as of 2020). LMU is a private Jesuit college in Los Angeles, California. On average, the library hosts between forty to fifty individual programs each year,

including speaker events, tours, workshops, exhibitions, and other creative events. Our attendance at these events ranges from 5,000–5,500 students, staff, faculty, and campus guests each year. However, like many university libraries, the outreach team is small and has limited resources compared to other units within the library. Our department consists of three full-time librarians (the department head, a programming/exhibitions librarian, and a student engagement librarian), one full-time professional staff member (an event manager), and the equivalent of one part-time student employee (i.e., the combination of multiple student employees working a few hours each week). By conducting this study, we hope to create a method by which to quickly prioritize and weigh the most and least impactful programs in our repertoire.

## Literature Review

The American Library Association (2014) conducted a multi-year, multi-part research project to document the characteristics, outcomes, and value of library public programs, and determined that public programming has become central to libraries' work and increasingly important. Moreover, discussion groups with library practitioners from a variety of library settings, including academic libraries, determined "evaluation" to be one of nine essential competencies for programming work. The white paper defines "evaluation" as "[working] toward using statistical and qualitative tools to measure program effectiveness and impact on all community audiences, including those that have historically been un- and underserved; and using this information to iteratively improve the development and delivery of programs." Some of the program evaluation characteristics include whether participants learn new knowledge, change their attitudes, or change their behaviors. However, of the fifty-eight ALA-accredited graduate programs evaluated in the study, none required coursework in library programming or evaluation.

The difficulty in evaluating and assessing library programming generally, or at a broader institutional level, is a recognized concern in LIS literature. As Farrell and Mastel (2016), Santiago, Vinson, Warren, and Lierman (2019), and Wainwright and Mitola (2019) point out, there is no one-size-fits-all method for either collecting or evaluating the overall impact of library programs. Farrell and Mastel's (2016) brief survey shows that librarians generally rely on only a few assessment methods for programming, even though they are familiar and comfortable with a broader range. They go on to categorize and define six types of outreach that are commonly used in libraries and recommend assessment strategies for each. Farrell and Mastel note that qualitative and quantitative assessment more often happens in the classroom, and less so for co-curricular library programs. Due to a variety of limiting factors (such as time, resources, and training) many librarians rely solely on head counts. The authors caution, however: "By only focusing on head counts we undermine our ability to accurately understand the qualitative and quantitative relevance of the assessments made when evaluating library outreach objectives and goals."

Wainwright and Mitola (2019) outline various assessment measures, including surveys, whiteboard questions, post-reflections, and summary reports, to demonstrate qualitative methods that go beyond head counts to provide a more holistic perspective on their libraries' outreach efforts. However, their experience confirms what Farrell and Mastel discovered;

“This study outlines our attempt at creating an “apples to oranges” method of comparison across a wide range of library programs, providing a way to measure relative engagement across multiple events.”

namely, “[because] learning experiences [offered by academic libraries] can often be unique or serendipitous, measuring how these efforts are contributing to the library’s teaching, learning, and research missions can be difficult.” By using a variety of assessment methods, as evidenced by the two case studies described in their article, Wainwright and Mitola create assessment plans that are integrated with institutional goals and use mixed-methods approaches.

At the University of Houston, library staff created a team tasked with evaluating the return on investment for the libraries’ outreach activities outside the classroom in relation to student success goals, as detailed in Santiago, Vinson, Warren, and Lierman (2019). By conducting an environmental scan, categorizing their programs, and reflecting upon various attributes (e.g. impact, purpose, partners), the task force was able to develop eleven recommendations for future outreach work. As the authors note, this type of top-down assessment of library programming had never been conducted before at their institution. However, the results could lead to significant improvements, such as “wiser allocation of resources, richer reporting and documentation, [...] and focusing on new outreach opportunities in high-impact areas.”

LeMire, Graves, Farrell, and Mastel (2018) conducted one of the most comprehensive surveys of academic library outreach, the SPEC Kit 361: Outreach and Engagement, in which they determined that “systematic outreach programs are still very much in their infancy and highly dependent on local organizational culture.” Their survey found that libraries used a wide variety of assessment methods for programming, including headcounts, observations, peer and participant feedback, interviews, and focus groups. Most of the methods reported were fairly unobtrusive and easy to administer. Most importantly, the authors found that twenty-seven percent of respondents indicated that no one was responsible for overall program assessment.

Similarly, Meyers-Martin and Borchard (2015) conducted a meta-analysis of final exams week library outreach initiatives (e.g. therapy dogs, extended hours, arts and crafts, etc.), including the assessment methods used by libraries. While most libraries collected feedback from users in-person and tracked the number of attendees at these events, others also collected social media feedback, used questionnaires, and tracked the overall number of users in the library.

As noted by LeMire, Graves, Farrell, and Mastel (2018), most assessment methods used by librarians are “unobtrusive and easy to administer.” However, some practitioners have attempted to use more complex methods. Strub and Laning (2016) outline a robust hierarchy of event evaluation methods to create a rubric that differentiates “how well” an event went with “what good” the event produced. “How well” examines the overall quality, as defined by success and efficiency, and measured by whether the event reached its target audience (e.g. number of attendees or market reach) and satisfaction or learning (e.g. content evaluation or space feedback). “What good” examines the impact, as defined by effectiveness and value, and measures factors such as whether learning occurred, behavior changed, or impact would be seen. The authors developed a question bank for all these levels of the rubric to be used as needed when assessing library programming.

German and LeMire (2018) also take a mixed-methods approach in their assessment of a major outreach event, Texas A&M University Libraries’ annual open house. In addition to counting the number of attendees, the authors counted the number of visits to specific stations within the event, the number of give-away items taken by students, a poll of students’ favorite station, a “one-word” assessment questionnaire, and a participant survey that collected both behavioral and attitudinal information. Chan and Kwok (2013) also used a mixed-methods approach in their assessment of an exhibition and three

associated talks developed by technical services librarians at Hong Kong Baptist University Library. For each of the talks, librarians used questionnaires to collect feedback and an open comment sheet (i.e. a large sheet of paper) to collect remarks from visitors to the exhibition.

Surveys and questionnaires, like the ones used in this study, are a common assessment tool among outreach and programming librarians because of their ease of use. Jalongo and McDevitt (2015), in their study of the impact of using therapy dogs to help increase library usage, asked students “Would events with dogs influence your use of library resources, spaces and services in the future?” using a Likert scale. Similarly, Lannon and Harrison (2015) asked students to rank their level of stress before and after interacting with therapy dogs. Both studies used open-ended questions to gather additional data. Pre- and post-surveying—like those above as well as Sclippa (2017) and Budzise-Weaver, Anders, and Bales (2020)—can provide “excellent insight,” immediately showing what worked during a library event and what did not.

Surveys used by outreach librarians run the gamut between “quick” pre- and post-surveys and more robust questionnaires. Nicholas, Sterling, Davis, et al. (2015), in their study of the efficacy of a residence hall librarian program, employed a survey of library usage that included various multiple choice, ranking, binary, and open-ended questions. Oravet (2014), in assessing their library’s “Human vs. Zombies” event, used a seventeen question survey intended to gather demographic information, information about previous library use, and assess whether students’ future use and perception of the library would change as a result of the event.

## Methodology

Between 2016 and 2020, we collected feedback at forty-four library events using brief, printed surveys that we handed out to every attendee. These surveys asked attendees to respond to three questions: (1) Why did you decide to attend today’s event? (2) What did you learn from attending today’s event? And (3) was there anything that surprised you and if so, what? Jackson (2019) outlines the intent and justification for using these three questions. A student assistant typed the handwritten forms into an online form which generated a spreadsheet of the 884 resulting responses. Additionally, we counted the number of attendees at each event. Using the number of attendees and number of feedback forms, we calculated a “response rate” for each event (number of feedback forms / number of attendees). This ratio will be used to determine a level of confidence in our data. For example, if half the attendees filled out a feedback form, then the confidence level for the feedback on that event would be fifty percent. An event in which all attendees filled out the forms would have a confidence level of one hundred percent. Relatively, we can be more confident in the perceived level of engagement (described below) for the latter event.

To determine the level of engagement (on the basis of perceived indicators of engagement in each feedback form), we needed to code each response. We used a binary yes/no code to determine if a response showed evidence of engagement. We decided that “engagement” would be determined by whether the feedback responses showed a change in behavior, attitude, or knowledge related to the goals of the event. Once again, we should emphasize that we did not rank the level or quality of engagement, as doing so would make it difficult to compare one event to another (note the “apples and oranges” problem described above). However, by using a binary yes/no coding system that could function without having to accord with the unique goals of each of forty-four events, we felt we could confidently compare different types of library programs.



## Apples and Oranges: An Indicator for Assessing the Relative Impact of Library Events, *continued*

We divided the spreadsheet of attendee responses into six sections and, following a norming exercise, randomly assigned each author (n=4) to code three of the six sections. The authors were grouped into pairs, and each pair compared their initial coding which found an intercoder agreement of between 89.8 percent and 97.5 percent. Each pair of authors then met to discuss the discrepancies in their initial coding until they reached consensus. Using the data from the coding exercise, we calculated an “engagement rate” for each event (percent of respondents who showed evidence of engagement).

## Results

Most of the events fall into one of three categories: (1) Archives & Special Collections Exhibition Openings; (2) Faculty Pub Night; and (3) Other. Archives & Special Collections exhibition openings usually consisted of a lecture by one or two invited speakers, a talk by the exhibition curator, an opportunity for guests to explore the exhibition gallery, and catered food. Faculty Pub Night events usually consisted of a lecture by an invited faculty member and catered food (Hazlitt and Jackson, 2016). Other events included in the review set include: Women's Voices (featuring dramatic readings of famous historical figures); LMU Speaks (an autobiographical storytelling program); Careers in LIS (a panel discussion for graduating seniors); Luis Rodriguez (a panel discussion with a local poet); and Collaboration as Creative Synthesis (a panel discussion with a local artist).

Figure 1 shows the relationship between engagement rates and response rates, with programs categorized by event type. Plots toward the right side of the graph had a higher response rate. Plots toward the top of the graph had a higher engagement rate. It should be noted that in the following figures, the y-axis is intentionally set to start at 0.65 (or, sixty-five percent engagement) to most effectively show the relative difference among various plot points. Thus, points near the bottom of the graph do not represent events with absolute low engagement but events with relative low engagement. It is important to note that all events plotted in these figures had moderate to high engagement, with more than sixty-five percent of attendees showing evidence of engagement.

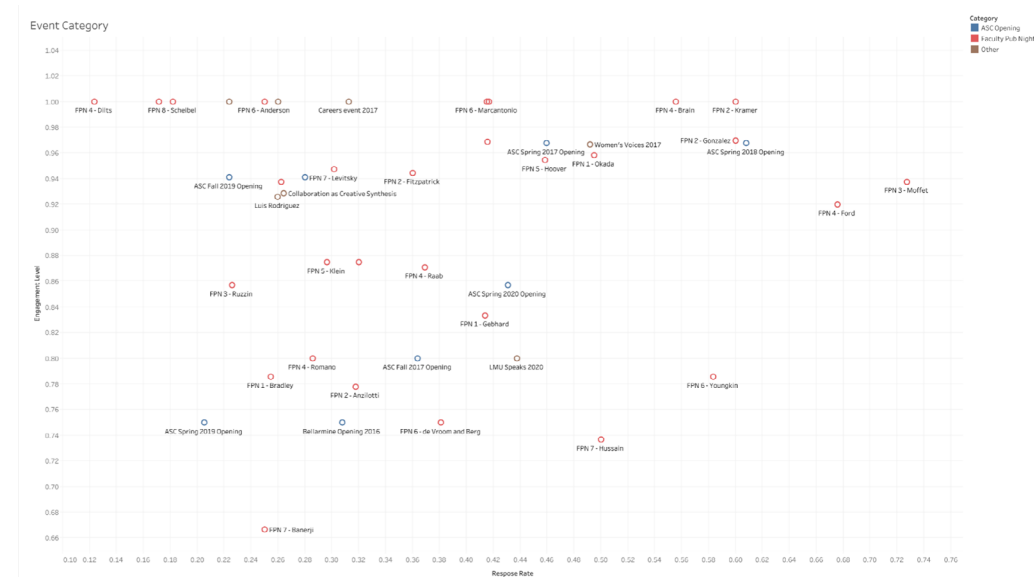


Figure 1: Programming Engagement Rate and Response Rate, By Event Category Type (Author created, available at <https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/john.jackson1527/viz/ProgrammingAssessment2021/Dashboard4>). Note the following abbreviations: ASC = Archives & Special Collection; FPN = Faculty Pub Night.

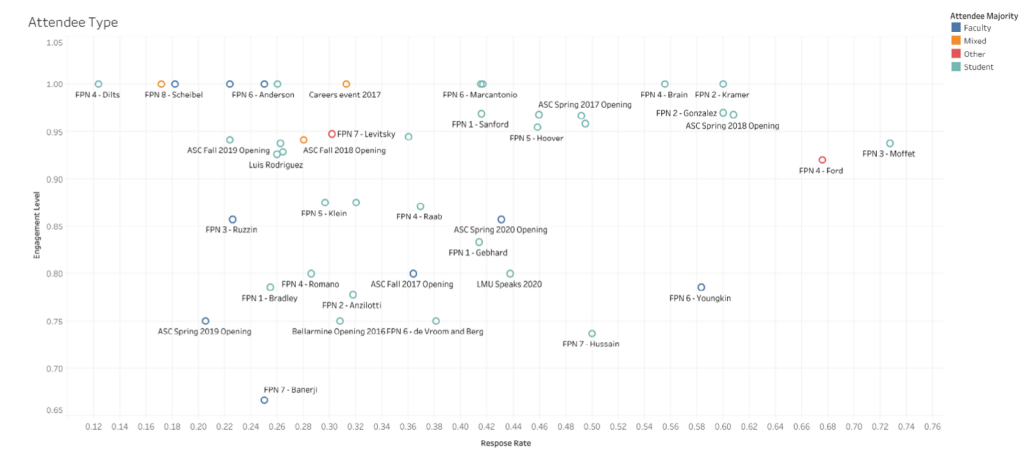


Figure 2: Programming Engagement Rate and Response Rate, By Attendee Type (Author created, available at <https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/john.jackson1527/viz/ProgrammingAssessment2021/Dashboard2>). Note the following abbreviations: ASC = Archives & Special Collection; FPN = Faculty Pub Night.

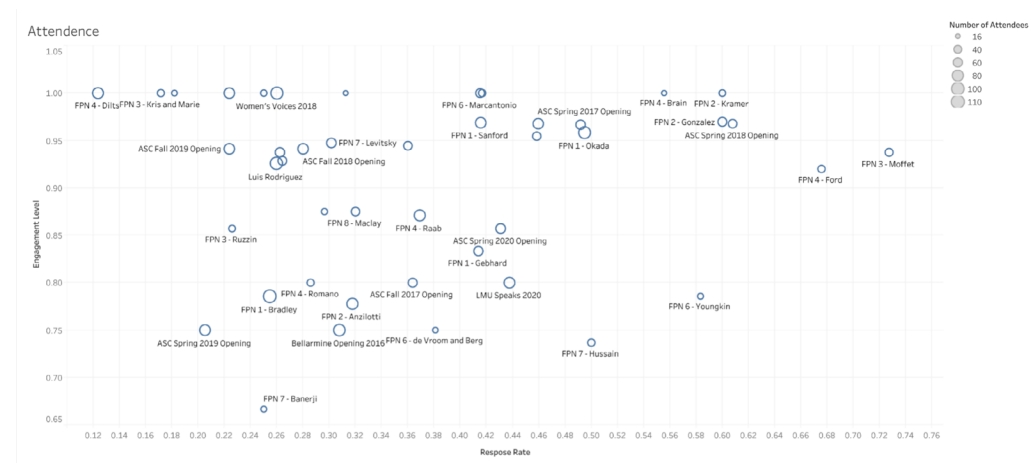


Figure 3: Programming Engagement Rate and Response Rate, By Attendance (Author created, available at <https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/john.jackson1527/viz/ProgrammingAssessment2021/Dashboard3>). Note the following abbreviations: ASC = Archives & Special Collection; FPN = Faculty Pub Night.

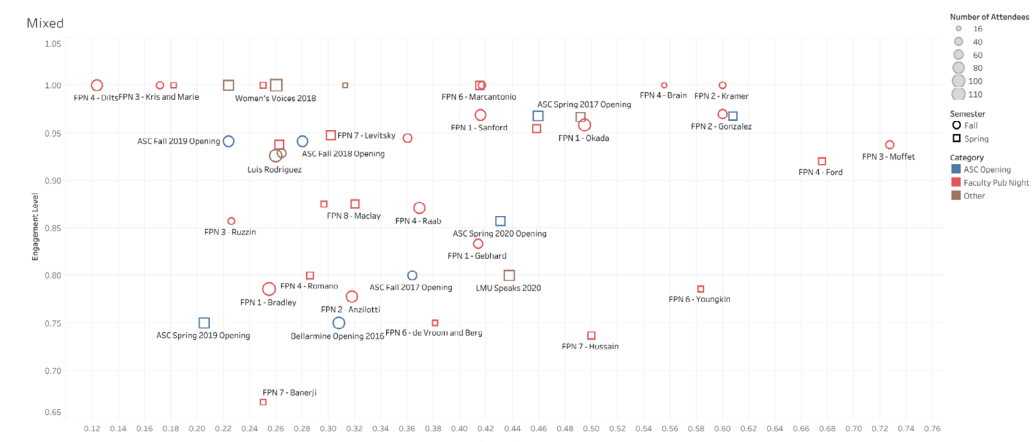


Figure 4: Programming Engagement Rate and Response Rate, Mixed (Author created, available at <https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/john.jackson1527/viz/ProgrammingAssessment2021/Dashboard1>). Note the following abbreviations: ASC = Archives & Special Collection; FPN = Faculty Pub Night.

The visualizations that follow (figures 2–4) show the same data, but with different factors emphasized graphically within the chart: by type of attendee, by attendance numbers, and by a combination of various factors (number of attendees, semester in which the event was hosted, and event category).

Discussion

It should be noted before we discuss these visualizations that one would not need to assess four years’ worth of feedback forms to use this method. As noted in the introduction, we sought to create a simple method for quickly comparing the relative success of multiple events, even if those events had different expected outcomes. For example, to use this method, all one needs to do is (1) determine a simple means for assessing whether a program attendee was engaged and (2) determine how many attendees showed evidence of engagement. The threshold for what constitutes engagement in step #1 could vary from one event to the next, but for the purposes of this method, only the presence of engagement is necessary.

Instead of providing a more robust means of quantitative assessment, the visualizations above offer “food for thought.” These rough sketches of library programming outcomes provide one lens, however hazy, through which to discuss the merits, problems, and impact of a large number of library events relative to each other. While it would be difficult to draw conclusions from the data with a high level of certainty, the visualizations offer an opportunity to generalize and inspire trains of thought that can inform future program development.

For example, events that fall in the upper right quadrant of the visualization can generally be said to be “highly successful” in that they show high levels

of engagement with a high level of certainty. Examining the events that fall into this general area of the graph, we find a predominance of Faculty Pub Night programs, specifically those that focused on a science topic (Brain, Ford, Moffet, and Okada are all names of faculty in our School of Science & Engineering). What potential conclusions can we draw from this observation? While it was not within the scope or methodology of our study to determine why any one event was more successful than another, it is tempting to speculate. For one, we know from personal experience that science faculty frequently offer extra credit for their students to attend extra-curricular events (relatedly, the difficulty of science courses makes the offer of extra credit even more attractive). Second, the topics are highly specific (e.g. Okada spoke about the neural organization of language

using functional neuroimaging). Perhaps the specificity of the topic attracted an audience that attended knowing full-well the subject matter to be covered. Applying the various assessment methods mentioned by Wainwright and Mitola (2019) could confirm the truth of these conjectures.

We also noticed that all Archives & Special Collections opening receptions, with the exception of one, have a response rate below fifty percent. Upon reflection, it became clear to us why. The typical structure of an Archives & Special Collections reception is that a series of speakers present on a topic related to the library’s current gallery exhibition; following a question-and-answer period, attendees are then invited to leave the event space to enter the

gallery and adjoining atrium to explore the exhibition, partake in food and drink, and mingle with other attendees. At Faculty Pub Night events, food is provided in advance and throughout the event, and we ask attendees to fill out the feedback forms while they are sitting and before they leave the event. We also encourage attendees at Archives & Special Collections receptions to fill out feedback forms, but at the moment just before they are invited to explore the exhibition (and the buffet). It is reasonable to conclude that many attendees skip the feedback forms altogether so they can partake in the food and gallery walk. Until reviewing the visualizations, this generalization was not obvious to us. Knowing this, we could change the program for future Archives & Special Collections receptions to accommodate more time for feedback forms, thus increasing the response rate and level of confidence in the engagement ranking.

One additional trend presents itself as worth noting. With one exception, all events classified as “Other” (i.e., not Faculty Pub Night or Archives & Special Collections receptions) ranked an engagement rate of over ninety percent. Events in this category include non-standard or ad-hoc programming. One possible reason for this high level of engagement is that the uniqueness of these programs offers an experience that is different enough from the library’s regular programming to encourage a more enthusiastic response. Anecdotally, we know that many of our event guests are frequent attendees at other library events (e.g., library staff, faculty champions, student employees). However, without further analyzing and tracking individual attendance at multiple events, we cannot confirm this. It is also just a plausible that the uniqueness of the program attracted an audience wholly different from our usual patron. Once again, these visualizations offer directions for future assessment needs.

When the authors met to analyze the results, we noted the following additional observations:

- Events with predominantly off-campus guests (labeled “Other”) or audiences with no clear majority of attendees (between students, staff, and faculty) seem to have higher engagement rates.
- Events with mostly faculty attendees seem to trend closer to the bottom left quadrant (thus, lower engagement and response rates).
- No Archives & Special Collections reception had a one hundred percent engagement rate (although other events did).
- All events with more than fifty-five attendees have response rates under fifty percent.

These observations, as well as others not noted in this paper, prompted a number of questions which will be used to further assess and improve library programming, including the following. To what extent does faculty involvement (i.e., their promotion and ability to bring a class) influence these results? What is it about each event that determines its response rate? What are the most important variables to capture in future assessment?

One significant area for future research would be to build upon this model using more rigorous data analysis, such as regression analysis, to determine the certainty of the trends and conclusions drawn above. To make these types of analyses possible, future studies would need to improve the feedback rate of program attendees (e.g., requiring feedback during the event). A higher feedback rate would increase the reliability of the results and allow for more complex coding of the engagement level beyond a simple binary instrument. For example, future research could look for indicators of change in attitude, behavior, and knowledge separately. Additionally, future studies should also collect additional data to determine if other factors possibly contribute to

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engagement, such as: time of day, presence of food, various event formats (e.g. lecture, workshop), expenditures, and staffing.

Practitioners wishing to apply this method for prioritization and assessment can conduct a top-level review of all library programming as we have done, or it can be used in smaller circumstances, such as determining which of a handful of library outreach events needs additional improvement. This method could be employed to justify canceling a program.

## Conclusion

In this article, we detailed the development of a convenient and useful indicator for quickly assessing the relative impact of a variety of library events, many of which vary greatly in their format, intent, and expected learning outcomes. Using a widely-used instrument (i.e., survey) and data that is regularly collected by many outreach and programming librarians, this methodology could easily be replicated and expanded by other practitioners. As we have shown, the visualization of these data offers food for thought over which outreach teams can reflect and ruminate to discover generalizations that can inform future outreach work.

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## ARTICLE

Noah Lenstra  
Martha McGehee

University of North  
Carolina Greensboro

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# How Public Health Partners Perceive Public Librarians in 18 US Communities

## ABSTRACT

Public librarians are increasingly recognized as community partners who improve the reach of organizations focused in whole or in part on public health promotion. The capacity of librarians to support public health initiatives has previously been studied through case studies of particular communities. Few national studies have considered how and why public librarians are perceived as part of the public health infrastructure. This article analyzes data from interviews with 59 public library partners in 18 communities in 16 states across the United States. These interviews were collected as part of a larger study on how public librarians collaborate with partners to promote healthy eating and active living, or HEAL. Case study selection utilized a purposive sampling technique to recruit public libraries that self-identify as actively involved in public health initiatives. Representatives of those libraries introduced the research team to their community health partners. Findings indicate that in these communities, librarians are seen as trusted connectors, community experts, and as professionals that share goals with public health partners. Nevertheless, the strength of these partnerships is diminished by several factors. The discussion focuses on how a) increased knowledge and b) more strategic conversations on this topic, both within the public health and the public library sectors, could contribute to building better collaborations, locally, regionally, and nationally. Building and sustaining these collaborations could, in turn, help public librarians make more strategic and effective contributions to public health issues that appear both in their workplaces, and in their communities.

## KEYWORDS

Collective impact, community partnerships, health promotion, public libraries, qualitative research, community coalitions, health coalitions

The public librarian may play any of several roles in a community-wide action system: information specialist, catalyst change agent, interpreter of community need, channel to community resources, expert in planning and group process. . . . The versatile librarian may exercise leadership and bring library resources and services to bear in a variety of ways

—Margaret E. Monroe, a public librarian before becoming a professor of Library Science at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, *Library Trends*, 1976

In 2017, the health-focused Robert Wood Johnson Foundation characterized “public libraries” as one facet of community-based “cultures of health,” alongside “housing affordability, access to healthy foods, youth safety, residential segregation, early childhood education, complete street policies,

and air quality” (Chandra et al. 2017). Despite being increasingly framed as part of our public health infrastructure, public libraries and public librarians are not widely studied as partners within the public health research literature. Within that literature, the topic of the perception of librarians among health partners remains unexplored.

Existing evidence suggests that health partners tend to focus more on the public library as a site than on public librarians as partners. For instance, within the sub-field of public health focused on prevention, or “intervening before [negative] health effects occur” (Centers for Disease Control & Prevention n.d., 1), public libraries have been studied as sites for Play Streets (Umstattd Meyer et al. 2019), healthy aging classes (Matz-Costa 2019, 1007-1016), and summer meal and nutrition programs (de la Cruz et al. 2020, 2179-2188). This literature tends to focus on the potential of the public library as a trusted community space, and not on public librarians as active community agents.

This article aims to empirically understand how public librarians in particular communities are framed by the organizations that work with them to support public health. The focus of the partnerships studied is the promotion of what public health professionals call HEAL, or healthy eating and active living (Journal of Healthy Eating and Active Living, 2021). Results, derived from qualitative interviews with partners who have worked with public librarians in 18 communities across the country, illustrate some of the strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities associated with these partnerships. These case study results lead into a discussion of the further work needed to integrate the public library sector more fully into our understanding of public health infrastructure.

## Literature Review

*What Is Public Librarianship? Perceptions and Realities.* Public libraries are dynamic, socially responsive institutions that change and evolve along with their communities. A study commissioned by the American Library Association found that over 20% of public libraries offered fitness and nutrition classes in 2014, primarily by leveraging community partnerships (Bertot et al. 2015, 270-289). As these public health partnerships have become more widespread, they have prompted public librarians to reassess what skills are critical to being a public librarian. The Public Library Association (2018) found that the second most needed job skill in the profession is how to be a “Community Liaison/ Partner.” Public librarians increasingly work as community partners to address topics as diverse as homelessness (Terrile 2016, 133-146) the opioid crisis (Allen et al. 2019) early childhood development (Tilhou et al. 2021, 111-123), the reading gap (Pasini 2018), and adult education (Daurio 2010).

Although the idea of public librarians as community partners has received increased national attention over the last decade, it is not a new idea. In the 1960s and 1970s, work by scholars such as Margaret E. Monroe at the University of Wisconsin-Madison analyzed the various ways in which public librarians participate in community organizing efforts (Monroe 1976), finding that librarians across the country work creatively and nimbly alongside their partners.

Nevertheless, a gap in our knowledge centers around the perception of public librarians among actual and potential community partners. Scattered evidence suggests that public librarians are typically not considered as community partners on contemporary community concerns. Aldrich (2018) notes in her analysis of media representations of public librarianship that, “rarely does a writer miss the opportunity to speak to her own nostalgia about libraries, the printed word, and the quiet solitude of the libraries of her youth” (1). She argues these media messages make it difficult for librarians



to be seen as community partners; she also points out that librarians struggle to embed community outreach and community partnerships into their work. Empirical work supports the idea that librarians are not always seen as community partners, even in core areas like literacy. In a study on adult literacy partnerships, Daurio (2010) concluded potential partners “did not see the library as a partner” (ii). This finding was confirmed in a recent study of library partnerships relating to the opioid crisis (Allen et al. 2019), wherein researchers found that potential partners did not think of librarians until librarians reached out to them. A report commissioned by the American Library Association found that most voters do not see public librarians as individuals who are well known in the community, knowledgeable about the community, or understand community needs and how to address them (OCLC and American Library Association, 2018, p.10). The literature suggests those working outside of libraries would generally tend not to see public librarians as community partners, unless librarians first suggest the idea to them.

**Public librarians as HEAL partners.** Despite the absence of a national conversation on public librarians as community partners, over the past decade an emerging research literature has highlighted how, in particular places, public librarians do work with partners to promote public health, including in the domain of healthy eating and active living.

A state-wide study in South Carolina found librarians there already doing initiatives “around healthy eating and active living and [wanting] to do more” with community partners (Draper 2021, 1). A state-wide study in California found that librarians there recognized a need for a summer meal programs, and were thus motivated to serve meals at libraries in collaboration with summer meal sponsors, such as school districts (de la Cruz et al. 2020).

Similar findings have emerged from studies of particular communities. An Appalachian Regional Commission (Cecil 2018) study highlights how in McCreary County, Kentucky, library director Kay Morrow

“understands that the library is an important component of a community that can offer a lot more than books .... The library’s meeting room serves as a place for healthy-cooking classes .... Always eager to make a better life for residents here, Morrow is spearheading efforts to rebuild the crumbling sidewalks downtown, secure more lighting at night, and organize a downtown walking club to boost physical activity.” (Cecil 2018, 49)

McGladrey, M., et al. (2019) examine the efficacy of a multisectoral approach to development of rural physical activity promotion coalition in Clinton County, Kentucky, concluding that public librarians are key participants in multi-sector efforts to increase physical activity in rural America. In Eastern North Carolina, Flaherty and Miller (2016) discussed how the Farmville Public Library director worked with a parks and recreation department and a university public health department to start circulating pedometers and to organize the town’s first 5K fun run. In rural Oklahoma (Umstattd Meyer et al. 2019) and Columbus, Ohio (Adhikhari et al. 2021), two separate research teams independently found public librarians to be willing and eager participants in multi-sector efforts to bring Play Streets, temporary closures of streets for active play, to their respective communities. Bedard, Bremer, and Cairney, (2020, 101-117) recruited four public librarians in Southwestern Ontario to become trained Move 2 Learn program leaders, demonstrating “the feasibility of teaching staff without specialized training [i.e. librarians] in physical education to implement” (114) a physical literacy intervention. Also in Canada, kinesiologists made 90 pedometers available for circulation from five public libraries, finding libraries to be ideal sites for this form of physical activity promotion (Ryder et el. 2009, 588-596). Freedman and Nickell (2010) studied the impact of after-school nutrition

workshops in a public library. Sandha and Holben (2021) analyzed stakeholder perception of a summer meal partnership at a rural library in Mississippi. Together, these studies give us some glimpses into how those outside public librarianship frame librarians as health partners, but since the partnership itself was not a central focus in these studies we are left without any in-depth understanding of the perceptions of the partners working with the librarians.

This study seeks to apply this literature to assess how librarians are perceived by the organizations with which they work to advance HEAL outcomes:

**Research question:** How do partners that work with or include libraries in HEAL initiatives frame libraries and/or librarians?

## Methods

Case studies show how certain practices are developed in specific communities and, therefore, help elaborate theories related to those practices (Ospina et al. 2018). Qualitative case studies allow the study of research questions in depth, while leaving room for unexpected, interesting findings that can form the basis for concrete hypotheses to be tested in future research (Yin 2013). Case studies are especially useful when there is little existing research on a topic, as is the case here. Case study research has been successfully used in the public library research literature, most recently by Coleman, Connaway, and Morgan (2020) and by Norton, Stern, Meyers, and DeYoung (2021). The former studied how in eight communities, public librarians worked with others to respond to the opioid crisis. The latter studied how in 12 communities, public librarians support social wellbeing. The goals in these and other case studies are to identify and articulate practices and trends that can be further elaborated in subsequent studies.

Case study research has also been widely used in the field of public health, which has as one of its goals conducting “epidemiological surveillance,” or “the systematic collection, analysis and dissemination of health data for the planning, implementation and evaluation of public health programmes” (Thacker, Parrish & Trowbridge 1988, 11). Over the last thirty years, public health researchers have recognized and struggled with the limitations of existing surveillance systems, leading to a call for more case study research on how cultures of health emerge from the ground up in particular places. Most notably, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation funded a series of case studies on what they call sentinel communities, geographical communities selected not because they are normal, but because they may be unique, because they may offer researchers the opportunity to observe how a culture of health takes hold and evolves at the local level in a particular place (Chandra et al. 2017).

The broader study of which this article is a part has the goal of understanding “how, why, and with what impacts do public libraries collaborate with others to co-develop programming around healthy eating and active living?” (IMLS 2020). To answer that question, public libraries in 18 communities across the United States (Table 1) were purposively sampled to try to secure representation of an array of community types and regions. The purpose sampling of communities emerged in part through public librarians in these 18 communities self-identifying as communities involved in multi-sector HEAL promotion efforts through a call for participation circulated online in the Let’s Move in Libraries newsletter in February 2020.

“The literature suggests those working outside of libraries would generally tend not to see public librarians as community partners, unless librarians first suggest the idea to them.”



The participating libraries are in 16 states, and serve a range of communities, with the largest library serving a population of 2,095,545 and the smallest serving a population of 12,960. Like libraries nation-wide (IMLS 2021), most of their funding comes from local governmental sources, with some exceptions, such as the McArthur Public Library, which as a 501(C)3 nonprofit receives large amount of revenue from donations, and Delaware’s Laurel Public Library, which like other Delaware libraries, receives a substantial amount of revenue from the state government. The total revenue libraries have per capita also varies widely, with a high of \$88 per person per year at Elgin, Illinois, and a low of \$9 per person per year in rural Rutherford County, North Carolina. Per capita library funding serves as a barometer for both the political climate of a community and its relative affluence.

In these communities, the identification and recruitment of public library partners for interviews emerged through interviews with public librarians.

State	Library Name	Population served	% revenue from local government	Total revenue per capita
IL	GAIL BORDEN PUBLIC LIBRARY DISTRICT (ELGIN)	144,597	92.90%	\$87
MI	ORION TOWNSHIP PUBLIC LIBRARY	35,394	93.50%	\$66
NJ	SCOTCH PLAINS PUBLIC LIBRARY	23,510	96.00%	\$63
ME	MCARTHUR PUBLIC LIBRARY (BIDDEFORD)	21,514	42.50%	\$52
KY	MCCRACKEN COUNTY PUBLIC LIBRARY	65,385	92.10%	\$50
MD	ANNE ARUNDEL COUNTY PUBLIC LIBRARY	564,195	81.90%	\$46
NC	HIGH POINT PUBLIC LIBRARY	111,472	98.10%	\$43
IA	MARION PUBLIC LIBRARY	46,330	90.00%	\$43
VA	LOUDOUN COUNTY PUBLIC LIBRARY	374,451	95.50%	\$42
MT	BELGRADE COMMUNITY LIBRARY	12,960	76.80%	\$41
IA	PELLA PUBLIC LIBRARY	17,840	93.00%	\$37
MA	BIGELOW FREE PUBLIC LIBRARY (CLINTON)	13,805	93.10%	\$32
DE	LAUREL PUBLIC LIBRARY	15,877	46.30%	\$30
ME	BAXTER MEMORIAL LIBRARY (GORHAM)	17,651	97.90%	\$28
TN	MEMPHIS PUBLIC LIBRARY	824,805	98.10%	\$25
PA	BETHLEHEM AREA PUBLIC LIBRARY	114,175	75.50%	\$23
TX	HARRIS COUNTY PUBLIC LIBRARY	2,095,545	99.30%	\$15
NC	RUTHERFORD COUNTY LIBRARY	67,796	75.40%	\$9

Table 1: Data on funding for public libraries participating in study. Source: IMLS, 2021.

Librarians introduced the research team to their partners. The 59 partners interviewed (Table 2) represent a heterogeneous array of community partners – including local non-profits, public health departments, parks and recreation agencies, and K-12 schools – that work with public librarians in these communities. As with any case study research, these interviewees represent a small number of the potential respondents at their organizations, and therefore their experiences cannot be generalized as the experience of the entire organization. The research team did not construct a sample of potential partners to interview but instead interviewed partners through the case study process of identifying key stakeholders (Yin 2013).

The interview guide was developed from the Wilder Collaboration Factors Inventory, a widely used tool to understand how different sectors collaborate in communities (Perrault, et al. 2011). The guide was further developed based on the first author’s previous work on this topic (Lenstra 2018, Lenstra and Carlos 2019, Lenstra and D’Arpa 2019), as well as with the input of the project’s advisory board, which includes experts from both the public library sector and from the sectors that would engage in the interviews as partners (e.g. public health, parks & recreation).

The recorded interviews, which took place over Zoom in Fall 2020 and Spring 2021, were semi-structured and based around a series of prompts designed to elicit narratives about the development and utilization of public library partnerships, and of the roles of particular individuals, including the interviewee, in those partnerships. These methods received IRB approval from the UNCG Office of Research Integrity. The protection of stakeholder identities in case study research is a complicated process, particularly when communities are named (Yin 2013). Coleman, Connaway, and Morgan (2020) discuss these ethical dilemmas in their research on public librarians and the opioid crisis. All efforts have been made to protect the privacy of interviewees, but they were informed there is a risk of being identified. This study’s IRB application was modeled on that used Coleman, Connaway, and Morgan (2020), and one member of their research team served on the advisory board of this project and provided input to this project’s ethical framework (additional details in Allen et al, 2019, p. 25).

Data analysis drew upon the case study tradition of qualitative analysis

Sector	Non-profit	Hospital	Cooperative Extension	Individual Volunteer	Business	K-12 School	Parks and Recreation	SNAP-Ed	City Government	Health Department	Senior Agency	United Way	Boys and Girls Club	Community coalition	YMCA	Total
#	15	6	4	4	4	3	5	4	2	5	2	2	1	1	1	59

Table 2: Partners interviewed in study. Source: Authors.

(Yazan 2015). Transcripts were analyzed to develop case study narratives about how partnerships formed, impacts, and how they were sustained over time. Simultaneously, the P.I. and graduate student researchers used grounded theory techniques (Charmaz 2014) to extract themes that cut across the different conversations and cases. Table 3, below, which conceptually lays out the framework developed from this iterative coding process, emerged from four months of intensively moving across the three levels of analysis (interview quotation, thematic code, theoretical memo), until the research team came to a consensus about the nine themes that encompass the range of attitudes partners conveyed about their experiences collaborating with public librarians on public health initiatives. Each of these themes is illustrated below using a representative example from the different case studies.

Limitations

As with all case study research, this study does not claim to offer generalizable trends. At every level of sampling (community, partner organization, partner representative), purpose sampling techniques were deployed that undercut generalizability. It is impossible to extrapolate from a case, or from 18 cases, to make broad conclusions on a topic. Future research will need to do that extrapolation, and the discussion section concludes with a call for precisely that.

	Strengths	Weaknesses	Opportunities
Themes relating to connection strength	Trusted connector	Weakly connected to partner	Cultivate more connections
Themes relating to librarian roles	Community experts	Partner library seen as aberrant	Cultivate awareness of public library transformations
Themes relating to overlapping goals	Shared goals	Other libraries don't share goals	Cultivate librarian champions

Table 3: Strength, weaknesses, and opportunities associated with public libraries as HEAL partners. Themes developed from qualitative analysis, see Methods, above.

Findings

Across the interviews, libraries are seen as trusted connectors (Table 3). In some cases, though, the partnership is diminished because of weak ties to the institution. An opportunity identified is to cultivate more connections between public libraries and partners. Public libraries are seen as community experts. Weakening this perception is the idea that library partnerships are aberrant. An opportunity emerges to cultivate more awareness of transformations in public librarianship. Partners see librarians having shared goals with them. Weakening this perception is the fact that other librarians do not share those goals, with a related opportunity being to cultivate more HEAL champions within the library workforce.

Section 1: Connections

*Trusted connector.* Since 2009, the staff of the Laurel Public Library have worked to cultivate a reputation as a trusted community connector, with that work leading to transformations in partner perceptions. An early institutional partner was the University of Delaware Cooperative Extension. An Extension agent said that although he has worked in Laurel since the 1990s, he did not perceive the library as a connector until 2009. He now sees the library as: “Instigators. So basically I reached out to the library and said, ‘Can we use you?’” As a result, the library became the host of the Extension’s 4-H program, and as that relationship developed it led to the library and the Extension working together to transform the built environment in 2014 (Figure 1). Another of the library’s long-term partners, a faith-based organization, remembered that:

“The first big thing that... we partnered with them to do [was] to put exercise stations in a local park down the street. They got the grant. They got the equipment shipped in. I put people together to get it done. And it still is used today. That was one of the first and biggest things we did together.”

Since 2014 the library has extended their connections, offering nutrition classes in partnership with the Delaware Food Bank (a SNAP-Ed implementing agency), becoming a summer feeding site in 2017, adding indoor exercise equipment and 2019, and during COVID-19 starting a Farm-to-Patron initiative where extra produce from surrounding farms is dropped off at the library for anyone to take.

*Weakly connected to partner.* Since 2006, staff of the Gail Borden Public Library in Elgin, Illinois, have participated in Activate Elgin, a city-wide initiative to engage all sectors of the community to provide opportunities to improve health, particularly around HEAL. One librarian had been the key liaison to Activate Elgin since 2009, and when she retired in summer 2020, the

partnership was put into jeopardy. The combination of the COVID-19 Pandemic and the retirement of a key staff member illustrates weaknesses that can emerge when HEAL partnerships are dependent on particular individuals.

A community educator at a local hospital stated she was, “heartbroken when I heard that [the librarian] was leaving, because we have a super good relationship.” At the time of the interview, she did not know if the library would appoint a new representative to Activate Elgin. She said that during the pandemic she has been thinking about, “how can we continue to work with the library? [For example] can I download or check out a DVD from the library that would lead me in yoga because I can’t go in and see my yoga instructor? Can I go check out a cookbook that would have some healthier recipes? So what can we do? How can we partner together?” She said that she is unable to answer these questions because she no longer has a contact at the library. Having lost a key contact in the library, she feels the partnership has ground to a stand-still. The future of the library’s role in Activate Elgin is uncertain.

*Cultivate more connections.* The McCracken County Public Library in Western Kentucky has been a key player in multi-sector coalitions organized by a local hospital and the United Way. As the library director became more involved in these coalitions, she sought to involve library staff at all levels. The leader of the Healthy Paducah community coalition said that as a result of her efforts the library is “so visible in the community.” As much as possible, library staff spend time outside of the library, attending community meetings, doing programs at farmer’s markets, and bicycling around town on their ‘Brary (short for library) Bike.

This example illustrates how the library director empowered staff to cultivate connections with partners. A youth services librarian shared the story of how the library became a summer feeding site through her community connections:



Figure 1: Broad Creek Community Fitness Trail, an example of an outcome of the Laurel Public Library functioning as a trusted connector in the community. Source: Laurel Public Library.



“[It] started with a conversation I had at the food bank, when I was volunteering there with the nutrition coordinator from the school. I was at the food bank because [a local nonprofit that] was bringing meals to the library parking lot. [The nonprofit] put out a call for volunteers, and since I knew him through his work in the library, when the call went out, I decided to volunteer.”

Throughout the interviews with librarians and partners of the McCracken County Library, stories like this one occurred again and again. Partnerships lead to partnerships, creating a dense weave of different institutions working together to address persistent community health issues. The leader of Healthy Paducah said they “would be lost without them [library staff].”

**Section 2 : Community expertise**

*Librarians as community experts.* In the sprawling jurisdiction of Harris County, Texas, staff from Harris County Public Health see the public library as their “go to partner” for everything from mosquito control and testing to childhood obesity prevention. This intergovernmental partnership began around 2005 with jointly hosted “kid dance parties.... We’ve had smoking cessation, we’ve had exercise, family nutrition, and it’s just grown through the years,” particularly once the library became a member of the health department’s Healthy Living Matters coalition.

Three staff from Harris County Public Health were interviewed. In 2015 they started working on creating Mobile Health Villages that include free check-ups alongside fun activities like active play stations and farmers’ markets. From the beginning, library staff were involved in planning:

“I had met with the library early on. We started partnering with Harris County Public Library because we felt they had tremendous reach into the community. All you have to do is look at their branches to know what the needs are in that community. That was one of the reasons we wanted to work with them. And they’ve been such a good partner [with the Mobile Health Villages] since then. They make it easy, and we’ve established so many different kinds of partnerships on so many different levels [with them].”

Throughout the interview, they identify libraries as valuable partners because of their expertise on community needs. Health department staff later stated that library staff are “in touch with the community, integrated with target communities, they know how to connect with everyone in the community,” and “the community that we’re trying to target already perceives libraries as much more of a resource than a place where you can get a book [and] not only is the library a resource for us, but we’re a resource for the library.” The shared goals at the heart of this partnership will be returned to later in this article.

*Partner library seen as aberrant.* In Clinton, Massachusetts, the library director has been an avid proponent of HEAL partnerships, even serving on a multi-sector HEAL committee convened by the Community Health Network of North Central Massachusetts. Nevertheless, partners tend to see their library partner as aberrant, an exception rather than the norm.

The local hospital started working with the library in 2017 to co-sponsor a Walk with a Doc(R) program. The library had a walking club, and the hospital added their program on top of that. Asked how that partnership became established, the hospital’s community health specialist stated “we like to collaborate with non-traditional organizations that we wouldn’t typically partner with in the community.” The framing of the library as an organization a hospital typically would not work with recurred again and again throughout the conversation.

This attitude appeared in other interviews in this community. The food bank coordinator said her partnership with the library, focused around cooking classes, emerged “because [the library director is] so open to it. When I look at her, I really don’t look at her as a librarian. I guess because I have a stereotype in my head about what that means. She actually is more of a community advocate, and she’s kind of turned that whole position into that.”

The framing of “community advocate” and “librarian” as separate roles illustrates how partners, even as they work closely with librarians, see those partnerships as aberrant.

*Cultivate awareness of public library transformations.* When a new director of parks and recreation moved to Scotch Plains, New Jersey, the second person he met was the public library director. From that moment, the public library and parks and recreation department have worked closely together on everything from StoryWalk installations in parks to taster classes of recreation center offerings provided for free at the library. He stated, “at the end of the day they have resources I can’t get,” including their community expertise.

His awareness of the public library as a partner was not shared with his predecessor. According to the library director, there were no park-library partnerships until the new director came to town. His success, and his knowledge that not all parks and recreation personnel share his recognition of librarians as community experts, has led him to seek to inspire others. At the time of the interview, he was working:

“With the New Jersey Recreation and Parks Association on a [continuing] education opportunity, ‘Leverage the Library.’ I have a whole outline for it. It’s something that I’ve considered, how to work with your library: Obviously, you need to have trust. And, obviously, you need to understand that you’re going to benefit as much as they’re going to benefit. There are all kinds of ways to leverage and work with them and, and provide the programs and facilities that can benefit both [partners].”

“When I look at her, I really don’t look at her as a librarian. I guess because I have a stereotype in my head about what that means. She actually is more of a community advocate, and she’s kind of turned that whole position into that.”

**Section 3 : Cultivating shared goals**

*Shared goals.* In Anne Arundel County, Maryland, a community health educator who has worked with the health department since 2000 said that during that time she has always seen the library as “a spot to hold classes and meetings. It was a location to be at, rather than a deep, deep partnership.” This transactional relationship evolved over time into a “deeper partnership. Connecting [with library staff] about how to work more together” which led to the realization that both partners have the fundamental goal of “better serving the community.”

The realization of shared goals emerged through a community coalition. The coalition was “key in opening up the connection between [library staff] and me. The [librarian] is an active participant in those meetings, and so I got to know what she’s trying to accomplish, and then how she can help [meet our goals]. Being part of coalition meetings: That’s something that libraries do, they are active participants, I really wanted to emphasize that.” Her desire to emphasize librarians as active coalition partners emerges from her reflecting on the fact that earlier in her career she merely saw libraries as passive spaces.

Asked to give an example of what kinds of shared projects emerged through the coalition, she responded:



“They even helped us with some of our research: We did a food assessment and we utilized the library staff in designing this project. In the food pantry that we are working on, [we asked] ‘How can we have a better volunteer system?’ [The librarian said] she runs a volunteer system for the library. So we connected with her about how to develop that volunteer system for the food pantry. She’s got great experience, and advised in an important way.”

By cultivating awareness of their shared goals, these partners work together to develop solutions.

*Other libraries don’t share goals.* In Biddeford, Maine, the library works with the Coastal Healthy Communities Coalition, a SNAP-Ed implementing agency. A Nutrition Education Program Manager shared both her positive experiences working with the Biddeford library, and her struggles securing similar partnerships in other parts of her service area. She said the adult cooking programs she had at the library have “the most diverse class I’ve ever worked with. When it comes to age, race, ethnicity, gender, it was very diverse, which I think is a sign that they’re doing something right [at the library].”

Based on this success, the Nutrition Educator naturally sought out similar partnerships in other libraries, but has thus far been unsuccessful:

“The issue is I have reached out to all the other libraries [in my service area], and I get no response. If there’s something I could do [differently], I’d love to try that because while I’ve had a great relationship with this library [in Biddeford], I have yet to find another library to work with. So if there’s anything I could do, that makes that connection smoother, I want to try that.”

*Cultivate more champions within the library workforce.* Before moving to Western Montana in 2005, the director of the Belgrade community library worked in the corporate sector, and there became passionate about workplace wellness, eventually becoming a part-time fitness instructor with training from the YMCA. As a library director, she has infused the principles of workplace wellness into her leadership, and in the process has cultivated champions of HEAL within her workforce. She said that workplace wellness is “part of how I live and work and breathe. It’s a natural thing, a natural component of being a librarian.” She empowers her staff to see health as a priority, for themselves, and for communities.

One of her initiatives has been to work with the town government to secure paid walking breaks not only for library staff, but for every employee of the town of Belgrade. For her, the library can not only be a space that cultivates wellness among library staff, but can also be a community hub for health and wellness. These efforts culminated in the library securing the title of Library Journal’s Best Small Library in America in 2015. These efforts have led to the library being seen as a partner by everyone from the senior center to the regional hospital. By foregrounding the importance of workplace wellness, this library leader sets the stage for librarians to become champions of HEAL partnerships.

## Discussion

Public librarians are increasingly recognized as community partners work with others in their communities to support public health (Allen et al. 2019), including around the promotion of healthy eating and active living (McGladrey 2019, 62-67). This study found that partners in these case study communities see librarians as individuals who help them increase their reach, while also creating opportunities for new voices to be heard in community planning.

By extending the lens beyond a single community or intervention (e.g. Bedard et al. 2020, 270-289; de la Cruz et al. 2020, 2179-2188), this study

broadens the national conversation about public librarians as partners in the public health infrastructure. Although much more is needed to understand this topic, this study has set the stage for future research on the unique roles of this poorly understood (Aldrich 2018), if ubiquitous (IMLS 2021), social infrastructure (Klinenberg 2018).

The idea of public librarians as community partners on heterogeneous community concerns has been part of the research literature since at least the 1970s (e.g. Monroe, 1976), and yet there is still much to learn about why in some cases librarians partner with others while others do not. This study shows how in some cases partners work well with some libraries but struggle to connect with others, in others librarians struggle to sustain partnerships across staff turnover, while in other cases strong leadership and investment in partnerships by library administrators support this practice.

This research could be extended by surveying the membership of national organizations that represent the professional interests of the local organizations interviewed in this project, such as the National Recreation & Park Association, Feeding America, the American Public Health Association, Partnership for a Healthier America, Alliance for a Healthier Generation, the National Association of County and City Health Officials, the Society for Public Health Education, the Farm to School Network, among others. Such a survey could use the perceptions identified in this study as a starting point for more systematically evaluating how public librarians are perceived by others working in communities across the country to promote healthy eating and active living. The research could be extended even further to more systematically understand how potential partners more generally perceive public librarians as community partners. Much work remains to be done, and this study does not claim to be the definitive research on this topic.

## Implications

To ensure the power of public librarians is fully leveraged in multi-sector initiatives, it is important to understand the characteristics of successful partnerships, as well as what motivates partnerships. One promising practice is the identification and/or cultivation of health champions within the library workforce, as well as finding ways to more strategically educate those outside of librarianship to the reality of librarians as health partners. This work may require over-turning stereotypical ideas of libraries and librarians (OCLC and American Library Association, 2018) within the perceptual frameworks of partner organizations.

Beyond addressing perceptions of librarians, work could be done to better institutionalize “partnerships” as a core facet of public librarianship. Library leaders could share how they support partnerships at their libraries, as well as how they make investments of time and resources to enable library staff to participate in community coalitions and in other settings that would enable library staff to build relationships with others in their communities.

Within partner organizations, coalitions play a vital role in bringing librarians to the planning table. A concrete tactic would be to encourage anyone organizing or leading a health coalition anywhere in the country to, at the very least, reach out to their local public library to see if anyone on staff there may wish to attend a meeting, or join the coalition. Public librarians can also be on the lookout for such convenings. A convenient way to identify such health coalitions is through regular library participation in general community organizations -- such as United Way, Chambers of Commerce, or the Rotary -- that will typically include overlapping memberships with health coalitions.

More generally, this study suggests that a promising practice for public librarians is to simply talk more about public health. The results of this research suggest that the more public librarians talk about public health within their institutions and within their communities, the more potential partners see them as partners. The power of conversation is not to be under-estimated in terms of its capacity to change cultures of health.

### COVID-19 Addendum

This study was conceived and proposed before the COVID-19 pandemic's arrival in North America. All the interviews were conducted during the pandemic. The fact that public and community health workers were willing to take time out of their efforts to combat the pandemic to talk about their experiences partnering with public librarians illustrates the critical nature of these partnerships to the work of public health, in both good times and bad.

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## ARTICLE

Kristen Shuyler

James Madison  
University

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# “Make It More Fun”: Residence Life Employees’ Insights on Hosting and Advertising Outreach Programs for Undergraduate Students

## ABSTRACT

What can library workers learn about student-centered programming and outreach from student employees who design, advertise, and lead programs for college students as part of their employment in a student housing or residence life department? This study draws on cognitive work analysis to understand how employees of the Office of Residence Life (ORL) at a public research university host outreach programs for students. Fourteen interviews were conducted and analyzed to ascertain the definition and purpose of programming led by resident advisers (RAs), challenges in this work, and strategies for overcoming those challenges. Findings indicate that these student employees build community while meeting ORL’s programming requirements, assessing students’ needs, designing relevant and fun programs, and advertising programs in multiple ways. This study offers recommendations for program planners in libraries and extends the literature on co-curricular programming, providing detail from student employees’ perspectives.

## KEYWORDS

programming, residence life, cognitive work analysis, academic libraries, student affairs

Academic libraries are one of many entities in American higher education that host optional co-curricular programs (such as workshops and other events) as outreach to students. Additional campus program organizers include student affairs units (including residence life or university housing offices), academic departments, student clubs, and administrators. These groups offer programming to meet specific organizational goals, as well as to support campus-level learning objectives (Akens and Novak 2016, 339), and to promote student engagement (Eshbach 2020), a feeling of belonging (Eshbach 2020, 4), and a sense of community (Jaworski 2018, 114) on campus.

Most students who live in on-campus university housing have the opportunity to participate in programs offered by student employees who live in the same facility (Beck 2015, 36; Erb, Sinclair, and Braxton 2015, 93; Jaworski 2018, 4). These employees, usually known as resident advisers/advisors or resident assistants (RAs), are often required to design and host programs for students who live in the residence halls where the RAs also live and work

(Akens and Novak 2016, 336). Students living in campus housing, often called residents, are not usually required to attend programming, so RAs must attract residents to their programs. This is a familiar problem for libraries, who often struggle to attract students to programs. However, unlike most library staff, RAs can apply their experiences as college students (Roland and Agosto 2017, 187) to their programming work.

This study explores, through the lens of cognitive work analysis (CWA), how RAs pursue programming work. The goal was to learn from the RAs’ dual experience as current students and program planners. My experience as a “Faculty Friend” for a residence hall at the university where I work as a librarian inspired this research. In the Faculty Friend program, a faculty member is paired with a residence hall and invited to attend some of the events with the students in that hall. The goal of the program is to create positive faculty-student interactions. Through interactions with the staff in my assigned residence hall, I heard discussions about the challenges RAs face in their programming work. I hoped that learning about RAs’ work would ultimately allow me to support them through training (Roth and Bisantz 2013, 240), collaborations, or other interventions—or maybe even embed library-related content into their programs. Because I chose to focus on the programming work that RAs do, I selected CWA as the theoretical framework in which to ground this study.

## Literature Review

*Cognitive Work Analysis (CWA)*. CWA centers on how people do work in complex sociotechnical systems (Stanton and Jenkins 2018, 7). CWA is a multidisciplinary approach that connects to psychology, engineering, and sociology (Stanton and Jenkins 2018, 7). Jens Rasmussen and colleagues at the Risø National Laboratory in Denmark originally developed CWA in the 1960s and 1970s to design more reliable nuclear power systems (Naikar 2017, 529). Researchers employing CWA have studied many types of work, including librarianship (Simons, Dainoff, and Mark, 2007), health care, urban planning, and others (Stanton and Jenkins 2018, 4). I found no evidence of literature applying CWA to the work of RAs. This omission in the literature exists despite the fact that CWA is especially suited to “complex, dynamic” domains that require workers to “act adaptively in the face of unanticipated consequences” (Roth and Bisantz 2013, 240). Since RAs must display adaptability (Longwell-Grice and Kerr 2013, 99) in a complex domain—the residence hall—CWA is an appropriate framework for studying their work.

*Residence Hall Programming*. RAs develop programs for students living in residence halls, yet little research explores how they do this work. Numerous studies examine RAs’ experiences, including how they navigate their responsibilities (Roland and Agosto 2017), build community (Erb, Sinclair, and Braxton 2015, 92), experience racism (Harper et al. 2011), and understand their contributions to student success (Renn 2020). An extensive search of the literature retrieved only five studies with results about RAs’ programming work (Beck 2015; Conlogue 1993; Jaworski 2018; Riker 1988; Sargent 2010). One study found that RAs believed hosting programs was the twelfth most important job task out of about eighty (Riker 1988, 28). In another study, RAs

“Students living in campus housing, often called residents, are not usually required to attend programming, so RAs must attract residents to their programs. This is a familiar problem for libraries, who often struggle to attract students to programs. However, unlike most library staff, RAs can apply their experiences as college students.”

reported that, of the fourteen roles they play, providing programs was the least important (Conlogue 1993, 68). The residents in these studies also reported low enthusiasm for programming. Respondents in one study recommended that RAs should stop providing social and educational programs (Sargent 2010, 123). However, one study found that participating in RA programming was “significantly predictive of residential students’ thriving levels” (Jaworski 2018, 122). Finally, a study that analyzed perceptions of programming argued that “programming is ultimately a tool for community creation and maintenance,” and that programs benefited the residents and the community (Beck 2015, 36).

*Residence Life and Library Collaborations.* People working in residence life and in academic libraries have collaborated on outreach programs for students in a variety of ways. Early collaborations included creating libraries in residence halls. This type of collaboration was popular in the 1940s to 1960s in the US, but was almost non-existent by 2014 (Miller 2015, 3).

In recent years, library workers have provided services or outreach in residence halls, including hosting craft programs (Miller 2015, 11), offering makerspace tools and services (Shivley, Jarrell, and Denton 2018), and scheduling librarians to staff or live in residence halls (Long 2011; Ruediger and Neal 2004; Schmehl Hines 2007; Strothmann and Antell 2010; Tag, Buck, and Mautino 2005; Tran 2014). Several other authors describe various library outreach efforts in student housing (Barnes and Payton 2007; Beene et al. 2019; Bishop 2018; Nicholas et al. 2015; Riehle and Witt 2009; Ursin Cummings 2007), all of which attracted low student participation. These housing-based library outreach efforts, despite their unpopularity, illustrate the recent trend of embedding library outreach efforts in residence halls and other student-centered spaces on college campuses (Rudin 2008, 60; Strothmann and Antell 2010, 48).

Library staff have also collaborated with residence life staff by hosting outreach events for on-campus residents in academic libraries, instead of in residence halls. These types of collaborations are less common in the literature. Examples include library-hosted workshops and films as part of a residence life learning model (Kelly and Gauder 2020) and library orientations for RAs (Barnes and Payton 2007; Cannon-Rech 2018). Residence life staff have also initiated programming in library spaces, with one example being an overnight event in a library for residents and RAs, hosted by library staff (Otto et al. 2016).

**Methodology**

*Theoretical Framework: Cognitive Work Analysis.* In its fullest expression, CWA includes five phases of analysis that focus successively on different layers of work (Roth and Bisantz 2013, 240). These phases are:

1. Work domain analysis: Examines the overall work domain, or the “physical and socially constructed constraints” in which work takes place (Roth and Bisantz 2013, 244).
2. Control task analysis: Considers the tasks that people do within the work domain (Stanton and Jenkins 2018, 20; Vicente 1999, 183).
3. Strategies analysis: Identifies how people accomplish these tasks (Vicente 1999, 113).
4. Social organization and cooperation analysis: Addresses who uses these strategies to accomplish tasks (Vicente 1999, 114), including how people communicate and cooperate (Stanton and Jenkins 2018, 32).
5. Worker competency analysis: Focuses on workers’ skills, cognition, and knowledge (Vicente 1999, 115).

This study employed the first three phases of CWA: work domain analysis, control task analysis, and strategies analysis. Few published studies utilize all five CWA phases; most studies employ the phase(s) that relate(s) to the needs of the design project (Roth and Bisantz 2013, 258). I selected phases 1–3 because I was interested in the strategies RAs employed to achieve their programming-related tasks, in hopes of possibly supporting their work by providing library-related programming content in the future.

Participants in this study were employees of James Madison University (JMU), a public research university in the American South. Enrollment at the time of data collection (2018–2019) was 21,820 students, 19,918 of whom were undergraduates. Approximately 32 percent of students lived in university-owned housing. First-year students were required to live in residence halls on campus. Over 200 students were employed by JMU’s Office of Residence Life (ORL).

Strategies analysis and other phases of CWA require an analyst to collect information about “a variety of concrete cases from multiple sources” (Roth 2009, 142) and multiple roles. I first spoke with ORL faculty members to understand with whom RAs work, to create a plan to interview multiple people in their work domain.

The university’s ORL and Institutional Review Board approved the research protocol. A grant from the library provided prepaid debit cards as incentives for participants. I worked with ORL faculty to recruit ORL employees via email. Interested participants submitted an online form linked from the email message. I scheduled interviews with twelve people, based on the order I received form responses.

Pseudonym	Role	Length of experience working in the residence life field
F1	Faculty member	Ten years
F2	Faculty member	One year
HD1	Hall Director (HD)	<1 year as HD; 2 years as RA
HD2	HD	<1 year
HD3	HD	<1 year as HD; 3 years as RA
PA	Program Adviser (PA)	2 years as PA; 1 year as RA
RA1	Resident Adviser (RA)	3 years
RA2	RA	3 years
RA3	RA	2 years
RA4	RA	3 years
RA5	RA	<1 year
RA6	RA	<1 year

Table 1. Participants.

I interviewed six RAs, three hall directors (HD), one program adviser (PA), and two faculty members from ORL (see Table 1). RAs are student employees living in a residence hall. They provide leadership, programming, and support for the students living on their assigned floor or in their hall. HDs supervise RAs. PAs are student employees who provide supplies and program ideas to RAs. The ORL faculty members provide management, support, and vision for programming and other learning initiatives in the residence halls.

*Data Collection.* I wrote interview questions based on the first three phases of CWA (see Appendix 1 for the interview questions for RAs). The interviews were semi-structured; I followed the interview guide, but I also asked unplanned follow-up questions and sometimes asked questions in a different order than



originally specified. Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. All interviews were audio recorded after informed consent was confirmed. The recordings were professionally transcribed with personally identifiable details removed.

I interviewed the HDs, PA, and faculty members once each, and I interviewed the RAs twice each. The first RA interviews took the form of paired depth interviews, to discuss their work in general, answering questions inspired by CWA’s work domain analysis and control task analysis. I selected paired depth interviews as the first RA interview because they allow participants to interact with each other and compare their experiences in conversation (Wilson, Onwuegbuzie, and Manning 2016, 1551). Paired depth interviews can be helpful to describe “phenomena shared by persons in commonly formed teams or relationships” (Wilson, Onwuegbuzie, and Manning, 2016, 1559). I also chose to start with paired interviews because, among other aspects of my identity affecting this research, I am a faculty member, a position that typically grades student work and wields other types of power in the university. This

power differential might have been intimidating to students. I had hoped that by pairing RAs with a coworker in the first meeting, the interview would be more comfortable for each RA. I fully recognize that the power differences still existed and that they may have affected the RAs’ comfort, as well as how they answered my questions.

“All research participants consistently identified building community as the main goal of the RAs’ programming work.”

Next, each RA participated in an individual interview, in which we talked about the challenges they faced at work and the strategies they developed in response to these challenges. This individual interview was inspired by CWA’s strategies analysis phase. I held individual interviews for this phase because I wanted the RAs to be able to discuss work-related challenges without a coworker present. Topics that could cause shame or embarrassment should be avoided in paired depth interviews (Wilson, Onwuegbuzie, and Manning, 2016, 1555).

*Analysis.* I considered using a variety of CWA’s conceptual tools, such as decision ladders or abstraction hierarchies (Roth and Bisantz 2013, 254). However, my analysis did not follow one of these “specific manner[s] of representation” (Roth and Bisantz 2013, 256). Instead, CWA inspired my analysis of the data, which relied on open coding, loosely based on CWA’s first three phases.

After I read the transcripts once each, I created codes related to the first three phases of CWA. I then re-read and coded the transcripts using NVivo, which is software that supports qualitative data analysis. After coding, I used NVivo to retrieve all text associated with certain codes. I then sought to identify common themes and illustrative stories within each code. Next, I wrote analytical memos summarizing my early findings. As my interpretations continued to develop, I used two main criteria to determine whether to include each claim in these findings: the “intensity and insightfulness” (Harper et al. 2011, 187) of comments and stories, and the number of times each concept or code was mentioned by participants.

*Data Trustworthiness.* By asking the same questions of multiple people in a variety of workplace roles, I designed triangulation into data collection (Wilson, Onwuegbuzie, and Manning 2016, 1555). Triangulation, in qualitative research, refers to a researcher “drawing from evidence from multiple sources” to increase the credibility of research findings (Given 2008, 893). As I interpreted the data and wrote the analytical memos, I continually referred back to the interview transcripts to ground the findings in the data. Additionally, I shared

these memos with the faculty participants as a member check, a qualitative research procedure in which findings and interpretations are shared with the research participants for their feedback as a way to “optimize the validity of qualitative research findings” (Given 2008, 501). The faculty members were invited to give feedback on the analytical memos, in case I had misinterpreted anything. I also shared initial findings with a new group of PAs and received feedback from them, as an additional member check.

## Findings

*Work Domain Analysis: RAs Aim to Build Community Through Programming.* All research participants consistently identified building community as the main goal of the RAs’ programming work. As RA1 put it, “you’re trying to build community within a building.” Multiple RAs posited that programs help them build interpersonal relationships with their residents, which is an important basis for building community. For example, when RA2 explained that she dissuaded other staff from attending her programs, she said, “it’s a relationship with my residents.” RAs also reported that programs help residents build relationships among each other. As RA6 explained, attending programming helps residents “get out of their own world . . . and know that there are other people in the hall.” As HD1 stated, “I think the main goal [of programming] is to build that community and make sure that everybody’s comfortable.” The PA described programming as ameliorating negative aspects of community, arguing that programs “avoid problems in the halls or resolve issues . . . [and] bring everyone together for that group atmosphere.” Similarly, a faculty member explained that programming may help improve relationships between RAs and residents, offering, “I think from an RA perspective . . . they get the benefit [when they lead a program] of being seen as something other than a disciplinarian, and so that helps them build community.”

*Work Domain Analysis: RAs Must Adhere to a Programming Model.* When discussing the definition of programs, all participant types referred to the ORL programming model. At the time of data collection, ORL’s programming model required that RAs host two community programs, one academic program, and one multicultural program every semester. Additionally, HDs were required to offer specialty programs covering topics such as safety and security. RA1 summarized the RAs’ sentiments when she defined programs as “an organized time to be with your residents and talking about a specific topic, but I’d say they [ORL] define a program in their categories and I think that’s more how my mind thinks of them.” A faculty member explained, “programs are planned activities that should be intentional in design, so the RAs should think about what their residents need as well as how they fall into the categories within our programming model.” The PA also emphasized the programming model, defining programs as “events held by RAs that are meant to challenge residents, to educate residents, to give them a new experience... the program model wants these programs to be substantial for students.”

*Control Task Analysis and Strategies Analysis: Top Four Challenges RAs Face.* To understand how RAs applied a variety of strategies in their programming work, I asked multiple questions about their jobs’ complexities and challenges, and how they faced these. The four main challenges that RAs described were: getting residents to attend programs, scheduling programs, designing academic programs, and summoning the creativity to design programs.

All participants discussed the challenge of low program attendance. RA2 stated, “the biggest challenge is attendance and making sure people want to show up.” As HD3 said, “no matter what we try, students just were not interested in attending programs.” RA3 shared details about how this can be



disheartening, noting, “the most challenging thing [is] when you’re expecting more people to show up, but only a few people show up, and you still have to hold the program. You’re obviously disappointed at the lack of turnout, but you still have to make it worth their while for the people that did show up. I think that’s probably the hardest part of programming.”

The difficulty of scheduling programs was another main challenge. As RA5 explained, “you’re never going to find a time that everybody can come. All students are ridiculously busy.” Several participants linked scheduling programs with the attendance challenge, as well as with the concept that a program needs to be worth the time. RA3 noted that, “you have to think of . . . what time would work for you, and then try to incentivize [residents]. Because [programs] are taking away time from them to do something. You have to make it worth it. . . I think that’s probably the biggest problem I have, making sure that tradeoff is there.” HD1 also discussed the attendance and scheduling challenges, and linked them back to the community-building goal, explaining, “you don’t know . . . whether people are going to come [to programs] and what day works best, so I think that can be a challenge. Just that initial start-up of ‘How do we build a community?’”

Most participants underscored that it was challenging for RAs to create academic programs that met the requirements of ORL’s programming model. All research participants believed that academic programs should primarily help students succeed with their schoolwork. A faculty member offered, “we have academic programs because we want them to be a successful college student.” RAs echoed this, including RA3, who stated, “academic [programs are] something that you can discuss in the residence hall that will benefit you in the classroom.” However, all participant types noted that it was sometimes difficult to discern whether a program meets ORL’s definition. HD1 found it challenging, even after previous experience as both an RA and an HD, offering, “I’ve always struggled personally understanding what meets an academic program . . . It’s just hard understanding what really makes it academic.” A faculty member acknowledged this difficulty, musing that, “sometimes RAs get confused about what we would say is an academic program.” Similarly, HD2 noted, “I’m going to be honest. The RAs struggle with the academic one because it’s hard to make it informative and appealing for the residents.” Multiple RAs discussed the struggle to create programming that meets the definition of an academic program. For example, RA4 said: “[ORL] can be kind of strict on what is considered an academic program . . . so sometimes you really have to make a reach.” RA4 linked academic program requirements to the attendance challenge, observing, “I think community programs get more . . . attendance than something that’s about academics.”

Mustering the creativity to design programs was another common challenge for RAs. As RA4 said, “creativity [is a challenge], because I kind of lack that. I want the residents to come [to my programs], but I’m more of a black-and-white type of person, like, ‘Let’s throw a PowerPoint together and do this,’ but maybe that’s why I don’t get a lot of residents, because maybe it sounds boring.” RA5 reflected, “thinking of ideas [for programs is a challenge] . . . I don’t want them to feel bored. But I also don’t want to expend a ton of energy to try to think of something wildly creative.” However, some RAs enjoy the creativity challenge, such as RA2, who explained, “[RA1] and I both really enjoy the creativity part of this. I like coming up with ideas and making it personal to my hall’s needs, but I know that some [RAs] struggle with that.”

*Strategies Analysis: Assess Residents’ Interests and Needs.* I identified three main strategies that the RAs developed to accomplish their programming work, all of which were a direct response to the challenge of attracting students

to the programs. With freedom to pick or design topics within the required programming categories, multiple RAs noted that getting to know the residents’ interests and selecting a topic that would be relevant to the residents was extremely important to attract participants to programs. RA1 argued that RAs need to “choose what best fits your community’s needs.” The PA said RAs should design “something that residents will be excited about and want to come to. It’s good to take that inventory of what residents need.” RA5 explained that aligning programs with the residents’ current needs is important. She shared an example in which she had led a well-attended program on marijuana after a related incident in the hall. She believed that the residents who attended the program on marijuana “were assured that I was paying attention and . . . cared about them. So, I think sometimes we [assess needs] subtly under the radar.” HD1 noted that RAs “are encouraged to make sure they’re meeting the needs of their residents because . . . that’s the overarching goal of the program in the first place.”

The RAs assessed what residents needed in multiple ways. Some RAs asked their friends for program ideas or invited those friends to lead programs. Other RAs wrote whiteboard prompts to enable asynchronous communication about programs. RA1 offered, “I’ve tried writing on my whiteboard . . . and I’ve gotten pretty good feedback.” However, she also noted that asking open-ended questions wasn’t enough—she needed to offer multiple program ideas to get good feedback. She explained, “when I ask, ‘What do you want to do?’ [residents] typically don’t come back with a response. So you have to really [ask], ‘If I have these ideas, which one would you be interested in doing the most?’ . . . You have to be very direct . . . That’s probably the biggest struggle: coming up with multiple ideas.” Some RAs relied on their personal experiences—recalling the programs they had attended or remembering what they had needed when they were earlier in their college career—to develop relevant programs for their residents.

*Strategies Analysis: Design Fun Programs.* When facing the challenge of attracting attendants, RAs made programs that were both pertinent and fun. Research participants often noted that their most successful programs were fun. To probe how the research participants defined successful programs, I used NVivo to retrieve all the concepts (shared in Figure 1 in a word cloud by frequency) the research participants used when describing good programs.

So many participants focused on “fun” that it was synonymous with “successful” programs in this context. For instance, RA6 described a successful program by saying, “I combine programs with [mandatory hall meetings]

because I know that [residents] will already be there. At the end of my hall meeting, I said, ‘Okay, we’re going to do a quick kahoot [a quiz via an online game-based learning platform called “Kahoot!”],’ because kahoots are fun . . . I just made it funny and fun . . . they had fun with it and got competitive with it.” HD3 also mentioned competition as an aspect of fun, noting, “I think competition is a big thing . . . we want them to get engaged, and that’s why I try to do games.” The PA emphasized games as



Figure 1. All concepts describing successful programs

well, advising, “I would say just make it more fun. Games . . . are really big for programming.”

RAs consistently contrasted interactive or fun programs with academic classes. A few RAs made statements similar to RA6’s point, that “[residents] sit through class and they don’t want to sit through something boring, so [a good program] would have to be interactive or somehow [offer] some incentive for the students to get them to come.” A faculty member also noted this contrast, sharing that “what students want right now is something they can do [that’s] interactive . . . They don’t want to be lectured at anymore . . . programming [should be] engaging and interactive.” Finally, “fun” was also the keyword mentioned by multiple RAs when describing searches for program ideas. For example, RA5 said, “Pinterest [an online image sharing platform] is also helpful. . . . You can literally look up ‘fun RA programs’ and people have posted pictures of their flyers. Pinterest is so fun . . . It’s secretly the best.”

For the RAs, writing eye-catching program titles was an important aspect of creating successful programs. RA2 explained, “sometimes I like to keep [the title of the program] somewhat mysterious because then it’s like, ‘I don’t know,’” implying that residents would attend a mysteriously-named program to find out what it is. Other RAs suggested that successful program titles should refer to a game, use a punchline, or catch the eye in another way. As RA4 said, “I think an eye-catching name plays a role in whether to come check [a program] out. You’re like, ‘Oh, this sounds fun.’”

*Strategies Analysis: Advertise Programs in Multiple Ways.* Most participants emphasized the importance of advertising programs in multiple ways as a strategy to attract residents. HD1 explained the range of options, saying that RAs have “many ways [to advertise]. Our hall has a Facebook page . . . [RAs] also use GroupMe . . . They’re encouraged to make flyers . . . Sending out emails [is] also appropriate.” However, several people noted that students do not read email. For instance, HD1 also said, “my main communication for the hall is emailing, and nobody ever reads my emails.” Flyers in the bathrooms and on residents’ room doors were popular advertising tools. RA2 explained, “I really like . . . to make door invitations. I’ll tape it to their door, usually close to their doorknob so they’ll literally have to look at it to unlock their doors. I also put them in the bathroom.” Creating flyers in Canva, an online graphic design platform, was mentioned often. For example, RA6 explained, “I make really cute flyers using Canva. I’m like, ‘If this is cute, maybe they’ll come.’” RA2 argued that, contrary to what some think, students look at non-digital marketing as long as it’s eye-catching. She explained, “there are bulletin boards in [the] residence hall. People look at them . . . Some people are like, ‘Oh, they’re not going to look at a flyer.’ People look at them more than you think. If they’re catchy, eye-catching, you’re going to slow the walk down.”

### Discussion and Implications

As the RAs in this study pursued their programming work, they focused on building community, meeting ORL’s programming requirements, assessing their residents’ needs, designing relevant and fun programs, and advertising programs. These efforts were in direct response to the challenges of attracting residents to programs, scheduling programs, offering academic programs, and channeling the creativity needed to design programs. These findings reflect and extend the current published literature on residence hall programming, while offering detail from residence life employees’ perspectives.

This study is not the first to note the attendance challenge for programming, whether in libraries (e.g. Eshbach 2020, 3) or residence halls (e.g. Jaworski 2018, 125). One librarian noted that RAs are “occasionally stumped for programming

ideas that are simultaneously educational and engaging” (Long 2011, 204). A former “Faculty in Residence” member argued that people who offer programs face a “major impediment” because “college students do not want programming” (Browne, Headworth, and Saum 2009, 26). However, this same faculty member doubled program attendance after working with RAs (Browne, Headworth, and Saum 2009, 26). Similarly, another librarian who had served as a “Faculty Resident Mentor” found that RAs are “aware of the specific interests of their peers” and suggested that librarians should “seek their input to integrate fun learning activities and new ideas into library-related workshops” (Bishop 2018).

The findings in this study related to fun, games, competition, and interactivity in programs reflect similar themes in the literature, while adding new details about student employees’ perceptions of fun programs. This study complements a librarian’s claim that students will attend optional residence hall programs that are fun, interactive, and relevant (Long 2011, 207), and mirrors another study’s findings that argued “programming would draw more participants if it were more interactive” (Beck 2015, 38). This study’s findings also align with another study that argues that hosting competitions may help build community and identity in residence halls (Erb, Sinclair, and Braxton 2015, 91).

Although academic librarians and residence life staff have pursued multiple types of partnerships, none of the literature on these partnerships describes efforts to understand what RAs do before embarking on these partnerships. This study, with its focus on the student employees’ work, contributes to the literature on library partnerships with residence life. I selected CWA for this research not only because it is a work-centered lens, but also because it “allows for creative thinking and problem solving,” which encourages an analyst or designer to “consider the need they are addressing, rather than jumping straight in to solving the problem” (Stanton and Jenkins 2018, 44). Therefore, this article reports on the RAs’ programming needs, but does not share the interventions that may be created based on these needs. Library workers and others who host programming for college students may benefit from reviewing the specific programming needs and challenges expressed in this study. However, any library partnerships with residence life should be tailored to the specific needs of the residence life staff, their preferences for collaboration, and the culture of the campus (Bishop 2018).

### Recommendations for Library Workers Offering Programming

Library workers who plan to work with RAs or other residence life employees to offer programming to on-campus residents should prioritize:

- Seeking to understand the requirements that shape the programming work of the residence life staff. The interview guides for this study may be adapted for this purpose.
- Designing library-related programming that will help RAs meet work requirements and overcome common job-related challenges.
- Asking residence life staff, especially student employees, for advice on how programming could be designed to be fun for students who attend.
- Providing library programs that RAs can offer directly to their residents, such as an interactive online quiz (e.g., via Kahoot!), or materials for a library-related game or interactive experience that RAs can lead. Asynchronous program content may make it easier for the RA to schedule the program because they will not need to consider the library workers’ schedules.

When designing any type of library programming for students, library employees should consider adopting some of the strategies for programming success that RAs described in this study, including:

- Assessing students’ interests and needs. Consider inviting students to vote or provide other quick feedback on various program ideas via whiteboards or other low-barrier mechanisms.
- Combining library programs with other campus offerings, or providing a structural incentive for students to participate, such as extra credit.
- Designing programs in which the major goal is offering a fun experience, keeping the library-related instruction as a subsidiary goal. Gauge carefully what a specific audience considers fun. One method to understand fun might be to ask a few RAs what their most successful programs have been, even if there is no plan to work with residence life staff on a program.
- Naming programs cleverly to catch attention. Consider asking RAs, other student employees, or a student advisory board for advice on eye-catching program names.
- Asking RAs and other students who offer programs to share information about their online resources (e.g., Pinterest, Canva) or on-campus support for program design and promotion.
- Advertising programs in multiple ways, including digital and in-person media. Observe how student-led programming is advertised, and consider following the students’ lead on advertising.

### Limitations

As a small, qualitative study conducted on one campus, this research has several limitations. First, I conducted it with a small, homogeneous group. The findings presented here may not be transferable or generalizable to other contexts. Second, the sample of participants may have been biased toward people with positive feelings about libraries. The recruitment message mentioned the library connection, and during the interviews several participants mentioned favorable opinions of the library. Third, the student participants in this study were generally enthusiastic about programming work. The findings and recommendations from this study may not apply to people who are less enthusiastic about programming work. Fourth, despite my attempt to mitigate the impact of my identity—especially my role as a faculty member—by starting with paired interviews for the RAs, the power differential was still in effect, and it may have influenced the student participants’ responses. Finally, because I developed the codes and applied them to transcripts, my biases influenced the analysis and findings.

### Conclusion

This study examined residence life employees’ perspectives on how RAs offer outreach programs to undergraduate students. Using CWA as a theoretical framework, this study investigated the tasks and constraints that defined the RAs’ work, and their perceptions of the work, including its challenges and the strategies they employ in response. These findings and recommendations may help library staff who offer co-curricular programming to design successful, fun, relevant, and student-centered programs. Future work could refine scholarship and practice by conducting similar studies in more diverse environments or by applying the CWA framework to additional aspects of student-centered programming and outreach.

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## Appendix 1. Questions for RA interviews

### Paired depth interviews, each with two RAs:

- What year are you in school?
- How long have you worked as an RA here?
- How are “programs” that you lead defined by the Office of Residence Life (ORL)?
- Can you share an example of a program you led that went well?
- How many programs are you required to lead?
- What is the general workflow that you follow in designing and leading a program?
- How do you select program topics?
- What are some typical program topics?
- How do you design programs?
- How are you supported in your work designing programs?
- How are you expected to invite/attract students to attend your programs?
- Why do you think students choose to attend your programs?
- Are students living in the residence halls required to attend programs?
- Are programs required to have learning outcomes or other objectives/outcomes?
- Where do the programs typically take place?
- Are you given the option to hold programs in other places?
- When do the programs typically take place?
- What constraints does the semester schedule or academic year schedule place on your program planning possibilities?

- What types of decisions about program planning are you able to make on your own? Which decisions do you refer to others in ORL?
- What material resources (such as paper supplies for posters, food for events, etc.) are provided to you for the programs?
- What professional development support do you receive from ORL?
- Do any other units or offices on campus provide you support or content for leading programs?
- Do you know of any other units or offices on campus that provide programming to students like you do?
- What do you believe are the benefits of leading programs?
- Are there any other parts of your job as an RA that may seem like programming, but are actually defined by Residence Life as something else?
- What are other aspects of program planning that we haven't covered, but which you feel are important for me to know about as I proceed with this research?

#### **Interviews with individual RAs:**

- Who in ORL do you interact with or communicate with when designing and leading programs?
- How do you communicate with others when designing and leading programs? What modes of communication are used (face to face, email, text, social media, etc.)?
- Are RAs allowed to work together on designing or leading programs?
- Are RAs allowed to share program strategies and ideas with each other?
- What challenges do you face in designing and leading programs?
- What strategies do you use to overcome these challenges?
- How do your strategies for overcoming challenges change, depending on the type of challenge you're facing?
- How do the program planning requirements affect your ability to succeed in your studies and other non-work parts of your life?
- How are you trained to have the skills and knowledge necessary to lead programs?
- How are you otherwise supported in your professional development related to programming?
- How is the work that you do to lead programs evaluated?
- What are some of the most difficult and complex challenges that you face in your work planning and hosting programs?
- Can you tell me about a challenging or bad experience you had with designing or leading a program? (What made it bad or challenging? What caused the situation or challenge? How did you react to the challenge? What was the outcome? How did you feel during the situation? How did you feel afterwards? How did others help you, during or after this incident? What, if any, changes did you make after this incident?)
- Can you tell me about one of the best programs you've led? What made it so good?
- I am interested in providing RAs support for their program planning work, and/or some content or resources that you could use as programs or in programs. What sort of library-related content or resources do you think might be useful to RAs in their work to host programs? If we do put together content or resources for programs, how would you recommend we communicate these to the RAs?



## IDEA LAB

**Stephanie Diaz**  
*Penn State Behrend*

**Eva Murray**  
*Matinicus Island Library  
Association*

**Mary Lubbers**  
*Walla Walla Library  
Association*

# Idea Lab: Engaging with the Public During Times of Increased Book Challenges

## Introduction

*Stephanie Diaz, Reference and Instruction Librarian  
Lilley Library at Penn State Behrend*

In 2021, the American Library Association's Office for Intellectual Freedom (OIF) tracked 729 challenges to school, library, and university collections. Considering that in 2020 the OIF recorded 156 challenges, last year's increase was dramatic enough to catch the attention of news outlets and social media users across the United States. As a result, libraries of all kinds were positioned to make often difficult decisions about how to respond to the public's heightened focus on banned books. In this issue of the *Journal of Library Outreach and Engagement* the Idea Lab highlights two libraries: a true community library that was caught off guard by extraordinary media attention, and a public library that deftly responded to local book challenges.

## How the Matinicus Island Library Went Viral

*Eva Murray, Matinicus Island Library Association*

Matinicus Isle is one of Maine's smallest communities and is the Maine island farthest from the mainland with a year-round town. Well, calling my home a "town" might be a stretch; as an independent "quasi-municipal entity," the community is home to fewer than one hundred people much of the year. Residents—who are primarily commercial fishing families, making a living harvesting lobster—and the few visitors are served by a freestanding, municipally-owned electric power company, a taxpayer-funded one-room elementary school, and as of 2016, a library.

We joke that ours might be the smallest public library anywhere that is not actually on wheels.

Matinicus can seem truly remote, especially when storms brew—be those meteorological or psychological. Infrequent state-operated vehicle ferries, irregular charter passenger boat service, and weather-permitting-only "bush pilot" air service make travel to the mainland complicated and expensive, particularly for those who do not

own a lobster boat. Small extras in such a community are much appreciated, and our tiny library is that kind of luxury.

We began thinking about forming a library during a year when our one-room K-8 school had zero enrolled students. The island did not legally close its school, thankfully (and we do have students this year) but the interest in community services which could be initiated at relatively low cost grew legs.

“This issue of Idea Lab highlights two libraries: a true community library that was caught off guard by extraordinary media attention, and a public library that deftly responded to local book challenges.”

A neighbor who owned an 8' x 20' utility shed, but who wanted it moved, provided our library its first building. No massive granite lions flanked the front steps! We engaged a local carpenter to renovate the shed's interior, building a pleasant space lined with pine shelving, and the island electrician provided a few outlets and lights. We subscribed to a basic level of Internet service through the telephone company, did some local fundraising (mostly to pay for the lumber and the utility bills,) and conscripted some residents onto a Board of Directors to start our 501(c)3 nonprofit library.

At the island recycling center, a few shelves filled with cast-off books had grown into a sort of informal (if dusty) book room, and this sparked awareness that a well-maintained collection of more popular titles in better condition might be appreciated.

This island is located too far from mainland cell towers for cellular phone signal to be reliable, and you can forget about 5G data here. We knew that a wireless Internet hub or hotspot would be welcomed, and the library is centrally located—near the Post Office and easy to find. We had no idea, however, just how much love the collection of books—especially children's

books—would garner! We soon outgrew our shed, and in 2020 some of our volunteers applied to the Stephen and Tabitha King Foundation for grant funding to help acquire a second small building, this one exclusively for our Children's Library (yes—that would be Maine horror writer Stephen King, who is a great supporter of libraries). Along with many small local donations of money and labor, the King Foundation's contribution doubled the size of our facility, and the Children's Room is now a delightfully colorful space which makes everybody smile as they step inside (see figures 1 and 2)?

When we looked into becoming an official Maine public library, we discovered a couple of required elements were lacking. We did not have any paid staff—that was not too big a hurdle—and we did not have our books catalogued yet (borrowing is by honor system, with a simple sign-out list which seems to work fine), but chief among the obstacles was our lack of a bathroom. As our un-plumbed sheds are on property with no room for a septic system, official status in the eyes of the state may or may not be in our future. We are not worried about that.

This spring (2022), things got interesting when a passing reference on our library's Facebook page mentioned that we take a stance against the banning of books, and that we have a few well-known and generally respected books on our shelves which other organizations may have chosen to remove from theirs. A newspaper reporter from the Bangor Daily News called me and we chatted at length about the Matinicus Library—about how it is entirely volunteer-run, about how the wireless hotspot is a of great value to this island, about the new



Figure 1: Children's Room at the Matinicus Island Library



Children’s Library—but only the topic of banned books seemed to interest her editors. Shortly thereafter, the Associated Press picked up on the Bangor Daily News article and re-wrote the story to suggest that we—as tiny as we are—wanted all the books everybody, everywhere, could send us, and that we not only included banned books in our collection, but we somehow specialized in them. Uh oh.

Thankfully, we have not been inundated with the boatloads of unwanted books that we at first feared. I replied to many inquiries from people who wanted to clean out their attics, pass along some deceased relatives’ entire collection, or dispatch us yet another copy of Maus (we have several). We purchased every banned book that our regulars (meaning community members) have requested—patronizing brick-and-mortar Maine booksellers—but we are sincerely hoping that the recent, perhaps excessive, publicity calms down soon.



Figure 2: Shelves in Matinicus Island Library with local interest

I consider admirable: our small community’s consensus that no committee has the right to decide what the wider public reads.

**Author Details**

Eva Murray has been a year-round resident of Matinicus Island for 35 years, arriving as the one-room school teacher in 1987. She is the author of three books, “Well Out to Sea—Year-round on Matinicus Island,” “Island Schoolhouse—One Room for All,” and “Island Birthday,” an illustrated book for children. The Matinicus Island Library Association is a 501(c)3 nonprofit and a registered charity in Maine. Murray is the treasurer.

**Promoting the Freedom to Read at the Walla Walla Public Library**

*Mary Lubbers, Walla Walla Public Library*

Every October, the Walla Walla Public Library promotes free access to information by celebrating Banned Books Week. We create displays featuring challenged and banned titles that attract so much attention, patrons borrow the books quickly after they are set up. In October of 2021, however, the most recent display did not circulate nearly as well as usual. Patrons still stopped to look at the display, but the conversation stopped at “That book? Why?” If a knowledgeable member of staff wasn’t nearby to answer that question, the item stayed on the shelf.

My duties at the library are usually to pay the electric and telephone bills, to send receipts to anybody who contributes to our nonprofit, and to give the floor a coat of paint once a year—not to write back to people ten states away explaining why we don’t really need their 1923 copy of Little Black Sambo for our “banned book project.” This experience has been interesting. If Matinicus Island is going to be in the news, though, I am glad it is for something

In February 2022, several local challenges to books available in the high school library put the issue of book banning and censorship at the forefront of our patrons’ minds. These challenges (to Gender Queer by Maia Kobabe, All Boys Aren’t Blue by George Matthew Johnson, Lawn Boy by Jonathan Evison, and The Bluest Eye by Toni Morrison) provided us both the opportunity to highlight that we offered these materials at the public library and to position ourselves in a larger community conversation about censorship. The challenges to these four titles ultimately came to nothing; the local school board decided unanimously to keep all the books accessible to students. However, the desire of select community members to censor library materials has only eased slightly. We thought it more important than ever to provide an additional safe place to access those titles and others commonly challenged or banned around the country.

With censorship in the forefront of the community’s mind, we revived the banned books display in a way that was more engaging to the public, despite it being outside the usual time frame for Banned Books Week. Since our last display did not connect in the way we wanted, we needed to find a better way of providing background information on the ban or challenge for each title. Relaying the status of the book (banned or challenged) and the reason why directly on the cover seemed like the best way to catch people’s attention and motivate them to read or reread the book (see figure 3).

Beyond a new display, we made sure to communicate this information directly to students outside library, increasing our outreach to the local school district. We travel to promote library use and to educate students on the resources they can access, and to develop relationships with teens, as they are often most caught up in these attempts to censor information. Inside and outside the library, we work to present ourselves as welcoming to everyone and provide a place where patrons are free to access materials without restriction.

The official policy of the Walla Walla Public Library is that we do not censor materials. It is the right of the patron to self-censor and reject materials they deem inappropriate, but that right cannot be used to restrict how others choose to read, listen, view, or inquire. We also place the responsibility of guiding their child’s reading, viewing, and listening on parents. The library does not restrict youth from accessing materials, so it is up to parents if they want to accompany their children to monitor the materials they access. That is not a role that has been or will be taken by the library.

The book challenge at the high school has yielded encouraging results in our community. We are proud of students at the local high school who started a “Banned Books Club” dedicated to reading the challenged books by Kobabe, Johnson, Evison, and Morrison, and getting them into the hands of as many students as possible. The library will continue to provide support for these kinds of student-run organizations, and to any patrons who want access to information. Providing the space where patrons, especially youth, can access



Figure 3: Banned Books Display at the Walla Walla Public Library

materials with characters they relate to and with whom they may have shared experiences is critically important. And the Walla Walla Public Library will continue to leave the access to those materials unrestricted.

**Author Details**

Mary Lubbers, Library Technician, Walla Walla Public Library, Walla Walla, WA.

The logo consists of the letters 'J', 'L', 'O', and 'E' arranged in a 2x2 grid. The 'J' and 'L' are in the top row, and the 'O' and 'E' are in the bottom row. The 'O' is a circle with a horizontal line through its center. The 'E' is a stylized letter with a horizontal line through its center. The letters are dark blue.

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