Comments regarding the NILPPA white paper are being accepted until January 30, 2015. If you would like to provide feedback about the paper, please submit comments to Mary Davis Fournier at mfournier@ala.org or via the grant web page: NILPPA.org
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Photography by Thomas Alleman, Anne Hamersky, Mark McDonald, and Chris Savas.
Preface

The impetus behind this white paper and related project, with its ambitious scope of developing a framework to assess the impact of library public programs, came from the hundreds of librarians that the American Library Association (ALA) Public Programs Office (PPO) works with on a yearly basis. In many ways, this report reflects the journey that ALA PPO has taken, hand-in-hand, over more than two decades, with programming librarians—library professionals who create programs that respond to the needs of their community.

ALA PPO began in response to demand for programming models, resources, and fundraising skills to aid librarians in developing cultural programming, which encompasses the arts, sciences, and humanities. We responded to their call by working with library practitioners across the field and collaborating with a multitude of partners including museums, federal agencies, foundations, and other nonprofit organizations to support the work of school, public, academic, and special libraries as centers of community and culture.

To embrace, bolster, and nurture their libraries’ position as community anchor, librarians sought training, funding, and content. They wanted to learn how to write grants. They wanted access to resources such as museum-quality exhibition content, nationally distributed film series, and thematic reading lists and discussion programs. They wanted to recruit scholars, experts, and others to facilitate compelling arts, humanities, and issues-based discussions for their communities. More and more they stepped into the role of facilitator and convener and expanded the boundaries of cultural programming to reflect their publics’ aspirations for community health and wellbeing. They wanted to learn from each other and share their stories of success and challenges.

Over the past 24 years, we have witnessed this tremendous growth in the breadth, variety, and number of programs that libraries of all types present, as well as changes in the way library professionals talk about their roles as producers, creators, conveners, and content curators. In recent years the term “programming librarian” has come into use in public libraries as a professional designation and specialty; in academic libraries, the terms “outreach librarian,” “community engagement librarian,” and “civic engagement librarian” have emerged.
While the field rushes forward and programming swells and grows, the need for research into the implications, impact, and nature of library public programs has become urgent. As you will see in this white paper, questions such as “How can I explain the value of our programs?” and “How can we prove that our programs are making a difference?” are front of mind with library professionals charged with proving their impact to municipal officials, boards of regents, school boards, and other governing bodies, as well as, often, their own administrations. The pressing need is for data, deeper study, and the ability to speak to the impact of library public programming.

The ALA Public Programs Office is pursuing this research because we believe that the effectiveness of library programming can be measured in meaningful qualitative and quantitative ways that illustrate deep impact, enhance institutional strength, and address and reflect community needs. We believe that the labor-intensive work of programming involves multiple professional competencies that should be mapped and recognized and that the work of impact measurement will be helped by tools developed through this research.

This white paper is the work of a team of 25 advisors and researchers, and by sharing it we hope to inspire a robust discussion of our findings. We encourage members of the library field to respond with feedback, observations, and related research. Please help us to advance this discussion.

Mary Davis Fournier
Deputy Director
ALA Public Programs Office

The ALA Public Programs Office is grateful to project advisors Carolyn Anthony, Frances Ashburn, Geoffrey Banks, David W. Carr, Monica Chapa Domercq, Terrilyn Chun, Julie Derden, Theresa Embrey, Henry Fortunato, Janine Golden, Larry Grieco, Tim Grimes, Colleen Leddy, Annie Norman, Manju Prasad-Rao, Kathy Rosa, and Marcia Warner, as well as Sean Beharry, Kate Flinner, John Fraser, Beverly K. Sheppard, and Rebecca Joy Norlander from New Knowledge Organization Ltd., and Deborah Robertson, Colleen Barbus, and Sarah Ostman from the ALA Public Programs Office, for their work throughout this planning process, as well as the hundreds of respondents to our survey via ProgrammingLibrarian.org and the thousands of programming librarians who contributed to our report archive over the past 24 years. Sincere thanks also to Robert Horton at the Institute of Museum and Library Service and Chris Jowaisas at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, who have been invaluable thinking partners in this process.

For more information about the National Impact of Library Public Programs Assessment project, including project advisor bios and related resources, please visit ala.org/NILPPA. Comment on the white paper at NILPPA.org.
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Overview

The Public Libraries Survey, conducted by the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) in 2010, reported that public libraries across the United States had presented 3.75 million programs that year, an increase of 44.6% since 2004. That astonishing increase illustrates how programming has become a key library service and an essential component of how libraries connect people with ideas in a changing world. Throughout their history, libraries have redefined the nature of their services in response to community needs. Programming, whether it be for job-seekers, students, new Americans, or curious retirees, is a profound indicator of how libraries have continued to shift and add services that meet emerging changes and critical concerns in their surrounding communities.

Although library-based programming has long been an integral part of library service in all types of libraries, there are indications that it has taken on more significance in recent years. Whether documented in sheer numbers or in changing library layouts—from computer work stations to community meeting rooms, from children’s gathering places to classrooms for all kinds of public education—libraries continue to evolve as democratic gateways to learning. Public libraries are increasingly anchors to their communities, magnets for new immigrants, job centers for the unemployed, outposts for government services, and research centers for students. Academic libraries have transformed from quiet study chambers to vibrant centers for collaboration, debate, and exploration for both the university community and its neighbors. In all these services, librarians remain the essential knowledge guides.

The dramatic rise in public programming and audiences raises many questions. What are the current best practices in this service? Who initiates public programming in libraries? What criteria guide program selection? What competencies and training lead to excellence as a library programmer? What kinds of community partners are most suitable? How is funding obtained? How are public issues identified? And, ultimately, what is the impact of library programs, individually and collectively, on the people who attend?

The American Library Association (ALA) Public Programs Office (PPO), with funding from IMLS, seeks to explore these questions through the National Impact of Library Public Programs Assessment (NILPPA). PPO and its research partner, New Knowledge Organization Ltd. (NewKnowledge), have initiated the first steps in planning and implementing a long-term, multifaceted research framework that seeks to understand the characteristics, audiences, impacts, and value of programming in libraries at the national level. The stated purpose of this project is to “ensure public and private sector leaders have the information they need to make strategic investment decisions that will further leverage the infrastructure and expertise of libraries.” Funders, policy makers, educators, librarians, and libraries’ institutional and civic partners may benefit from the findings of this study.
A Note on “Public” Programming

While ALA PPO supports libraries of all types, the experiences, scenarios, and discussions explored in the NILPPA project to date have mostly been in the public, academic, and special library realm. (School libraries and school library programs are not a focus of this agenda.) One may wonder how the question of “public” programming is relevant in non-public libraries; for the NILPPA advisory team, the question laid in the very definition of the word “public.”

The advisors concluded that, for the purposes of this research, “public” and “public programs” refer to the library’s public — the community the library serves or the audiences the library targets for its programs. For public libraries this may mean the whole community or, perhaps, seniors. In the case of academic libraries the public may be the student body, the chemistry department, or incoming freshmen. For a special library such as the Pritzker Military Museum & Library it may be veterans, servicemen, or veterans services organizations.

Initial Steps in the Project

- Preliminary Analysis -

To launch this project, NewKnowledge began by documenting the current state of programming in libraries through a meta-analysis of related documents in the ALA offices and ALA PPO archives and through feedback from a nationwide professional opinion survey from current library programmers, available as downloadable reports on ala.org/NILPPA under “Related Resources.” Both of these tasks confirmed a wide range of programs and audiences and a positive growth trend in programming. Both analyses turned up anecdotal evidence of the value of programs, but provided no standard process for assessing and documenting impact — a tool that would be of great importance for continued growth and value of programming in the library field.
WOULD IT HELP YOU TO HAVE TANGIBLE EVIDENCE OF A PROGRAM’S SUCCESS?
WHAT MIGHT THAT EVIDENCE LOOK LIKE?
WHAT MIGHT YOU DO WITH IT?
READ RESPONSES AND PROVIDE YOUR OWN FEEDBACK AT NILPPA.ORG

- Workshop #1 -

Two planning workshops took on the initial steps of defining research needs. The first group of six library professionals (representing public, academic, and special libraries) met with ALA staff and NewKnowledge researchers on January 24, 2014, at the ALA Midwinter Meeting in Philadelphia. This one-day workshop focused on identifying the many types of audiences being served through library programming, as well as the range of program types being offered. In addition to staff-generated programs, the group noted many variations of partnership programs, presented in collaboration with a breadth of community organizations. Partnership programs provide libraries with many different ways to assess and serve community needs as well as to identify new audiences.

HOW DO NEW PROGRAMS COME TO FRUITION IN YOUR LIBRARY?
READ RESPONSES AND PROVIDE YOUR OWN FEEDBACK AT NILPPA.ORG
Just as audiences divide into many segments, so do program goals. The advisory group identified numerous goals that range from enhancing literacy to providing a sense of belonging. These goals generally divided into acquiring new knowledge and learning new skills. Many were based on obtaining practical information such as use of new technologies and initiating job searches. Others sought to introduce new topics and resources and to encourage discussion and critical thinking. The range of program goals made clear that programming librarians, along with their community partners, need additional research that will help them create targeted and effective programming, identify public needs, and access many learning resources.

Perhaps the most important conclusion of the group’s discussion on research methodologies was that, considering the numerous variables—library size and type, audience segmentation, program structure, and potential partnerships—there is no “one-size-fits-all” tool for studying the processes, impacts, and training for public programming in libraries. Instead, a suite of research methods would most likely be needed to provide a comprehensive understanding.

- Workshop #2 -

A second group of 11 library professionals (representing public, academic, and special libraries, as well as a state library and a state humanities agency) gathered in Chicago on May 8 and 9, 2014, to review and build on the work of the initial workshop. Their task was to further refine the research framework by identifying the kinds of evidence necessary to validate the impact of programs. This first assignment required a thorough analysis of the distinguishing characteristics of different types of library programs, as well as libraries themselves. With so many variables to consider, the group engaged in rich conversation about how best to apply types of research methods to develop a multifaceted national picture of the many impacts of library programming.

Throughout the two-day workshop, the participants met in small working groups to probe such questions as:

- How do we define success for local, regional, and national program models?
- How do we define success for collaborative, culturally co-created programs and how do they differ from programs originated by the library alone?
- What indicators of success reach across program types versus those with more specific application?

Workshop participants in Chicago were encouraged to think about the parts of a useful program model and how ALA PPO could employ such a model to improve programming impacts for individuals, groups, and society. Figure 1 offers an overview of the constituent parts of a logic model that could be adapted and applied to an assessment of public programming.
The group also examined how geography, community size, library type, and cultural or economic segments affect the nature of programs and their impact on varied audiences.

Finally, there was considerable discussion among the working groups about the essential competencies required for serving as a library program specialist; about the processes for building strong community collaboration, including assessing community needs; and finally, about the many uses of research data among all stakeholders, beyond the library itself. There emerged strong recognition that the success of this research framework will require broad outreach to the numerous library associations and collaborative groups that serve the field, as well as to those organizations with a shared interest in the results, such as the Federation of State Humanities Councils, Pew Research Center, Rand Corporation, and numerous other direct and indirect stakeholders.

Workshop participants discussed how to assure such active participation through multiple outreach methods, including in-person contact, the web, remote sites, and others. Finding ways to assure buy-in from libraries across the country led to suggestions about establishing talk-back mechanisms at national and regional meetings, using simple one-question iPad surveys, strategically placing articles in journals and other publications, and developing and sharing talking points. It became clear that the research framework must be multifaceted and must be implemented over several years.

The initial information gathering and the work of the two NILPPA advisory groups has identified many of the questions that are emerging as a result of the growth of library programming. These discussions painted a vibrant picture of library programming as it has developed in libraries of all sizes and types. They confirmed how programming has become a core library service, and further defined the need for more specific research about the aspects of programming that are making a difference in individual lives.
Responding to the White Paper

NILPPA is designed to develop a research framework — a plan for the collection and interpretation of data regarding library programming — and to implement it over a five-year period. Considering both the importance of this work and the enormous variety of programs presented by libraries of all sizes and types, this project requires significant input from the library field. As described in the introduction, the first meetings have already taken place. This document both describes the content and outcomes of the preliminary work and invites further contributions and feedback from the field.

As you read this white paper, consider how you and your library relate to its findings and concerns. Are these similar to the questions you are asking? Are there important issues that are omitted? Do you have promising practices to share? What components of a research framework are most important to you?

If you would like to provide feedback about this paper, share your reflections on this project and how it relates to your work, or add your own questions, please submit comments to Mary Davis Fournier at mfournier@ala.org or share comments via the project web page: NILPPA.org.

The Need for a Research Framework

Libraries have always been dynamic institutions. From their earliest days they have served numerous purposes, growing organically as new public needs arose. The United States was an early proponent of universal education and individual initiative, and the idea of giving the whole community equal access to books and knowledge intuitively aligned with this cultural principle.
As “equal access” places of learning, libraries became community gathering places and civic centers, seen as safe and neutral spaces where all ideas might be pursued. Their roles as community anchors, centers for academic life and research, cherished public spaces in small rural towns and major urban locations alike, have led to many libraries becoming the center of their neighborhood social and cultural life. Often the largest and most important public building in a town, the library became the ideal place for holding classes and performances, concerts, and even exhibitions.

In recent years, public libraries have added even more services, particularly in the area of public programs. According to IMLS (2013), “a program is any planned event which introduces the group attending to any of the broad range of library services or activities or which directly provides information to participants. Programs may cover use of the library, library services, or library tours. Programs may also provide cultural, recreational, or educational information, often designed to meet a specific social need.”

This definition clearly covers a wide variety of possibilities, and libraries have served an increasing number of community needs through an impressive range of programs. Indeed, all types of libraries have responded to the growth in computer technology by providing both access to and training in their use, continually adding new tools and teaching. During the recent economic hard times, they have created job centers to help patrons cope, provided services to veterans and the homeless, and offered assistance in using government services. Libraries have addressed community issues, offering a neutral space for patrons, residents, faculty, and students to discuss and resolve critical issues. Many have added these services while continuing to schedule author talks and book discussion groups, craft instruction, film programs, lecture series, and an array of cultural and educational programs.

HOW HAVE YOU SEEN LIBRARY PROGRAMMING CHANGE OVER THE PAST FIVE YEARS, TEN YEARS, OR THE COURSE OF YOUR CAREER?
READ RESPONSES AND PROVIDE YOUR OWN FEEDBACK AT NILPPA.ORG
Presenting a full calendar of programs and responding to special needs requires the attention of dedicated staff, space and equipment, and significant financial resources. As programming accelerates, it has become increasingly important to determine the impact of this service on its many audiences. Measuring and reporting impact is essential to making good management decisions, seeking ongoing support, and creating and serving both internal policies and external policy expectations.

The recent meta-analysis undertaken by NewKnowledge included a review of evaluations from public, academic, and school library programs across the country. The analysis noted that these evaluations did not provide significant insight into impact. They did not include sufficient data to define the components of best practices, the outcomes of community collaborations, or the personnel competencies necessary to support library public programming. And, most importantly, they did not incorporate measurable evidence of the assumed public benefits. NILPPA seeks to explore these yet-unanswered questions.

Defining “Impact”

Understanding impact is critical to assure that the best possible programming is being developed to meet the greatest needs and interests, but a discussion of impact raises its own questions. Are the words “outcome” and “impact” interchangeable? Is there still a role for such traditional indicators of success as the number of participants? How will the many terms associated with evaluation co-exist in the research framework? These questions illustrate the complexity of the process ahead.

One challenge in developing the NILPPA research framework is capturing measurable data to reflect seemingly intangible, personal gains. The development of a research framework begins with the shared understanding that the lives of the users of library services, public programming in this case, will be enriched because of their participation. They may learn new skills, enhance their knowledge, develop new interests, or broaden their perspectives on important issues. Their experiences may also be transformative, becoming catalysts for deep-level changes.

The research framework should incorporate ways to assess many levels of impact and capture the changes happening in both the individual and the group. Learning in informal settings, whether in library programs, museum programs, or other contexts, often seeks to stimulate change of attitudes, behavior, or motivations within the program participants.
Some examples of such deep-level impact were defined as:

- Indicators that illustrate a deepening of the trust and reciprocity happening among audience members or community groups;
- An awareness of change occurring in an individual’s or group’s thinking;
- The generation of new questions;
- An increasing sense of confidence in one’s abilities; and
- Recognition that something has “pushed one’s mind.”

Just as the range of programs and intended outcomes is quite wide, the concept of “impact” has many levels and requires ongoing thought. Some goals can be quickly assessed; others will require more complex follow-up. The questions about impact will continue throughout the planning process and have already led to the awareness that a suite of tools will be necessary to provide a comprehensive research study.

Components of a Research Framework

As noted, the concept of a research framework requires the development of a structure with multiple components. Such a structure goes beyond simply defining a suite of research methodologies (survey instruments, interviews, observation, case studies, focus groups, etc.); such tools must be comprehensive enough to align many components, including intended audiences, clarity of goals, community profile, program type (format, stand-alone, series, collaborative, etc.), and staff capacity. There will be many differences across these variables, requiring a framework designed to mitigate differences and build on core principles.
“We need to create a research framework that is helpful, instructive, and guiding,” noted one advisor, reacting to concerns about the ability to develop the tools and processes that would be scalable to many library types and sizes. The need for “practical tools” received many comments, again stressing that the practicalities of administering studies need thoughtful attention to assure buy-in. There was general agreement that the studies need to tie in to existing tools and recognize what information is already being gathered elsewhere. What can be learned through social science research, for example, and where can such studies be found?

Building on Individual Strengths

One way to create flexibility in a research framework is to build upon an individual library’s current strengths and experience. The advisors noted the importance of relating research studies to library institutional engagement and strategic planning, allowing libraries to participate in those studies that best align with their own strategic priorities. Such an approach would help mitigate differences in sizes, types, and locations of libraries, so that each might build from its predetermined priorities.

Much thoughtful conversation also explored how libraries might be able to define their own areas of expertise and decide how they might both give and receive through a multi-part research framework. Asking, “What can I contribute?” or “Here’s what I need to learn that is outside my comfort zone,” could be an effective way to self-define an entry point into the research framework. Working from each library’s current needs could help level the field among library types and sizes in attaining strong across-the-board participation. It might surface a number of promising practices that can inform the research framework. In addition, early adopters of some of the new program ideas and formats might likewise step up and provide initial data upon which to build.
Articulating Assumptions

Before developing research tools, this research framework must articulate the assumptions and theories to be tested. They might include the following:

- Libraries today are committed to providing public programs as a core service and a means to identify and assist people in meeting critical needs;
- Programming will place libraries more at the center of their communities;
- Libraries are increasingly barometers of emerging community needs;
- Library programmers should learn and demonstrate a set of agreed-upon core competencies; and
- Libraries need specific tools and practices to listen and respond to community needs.

Each of these assumptions can be followed by the critical questions that must be answered in order to validate that these assumptions are correct. These questions will, in turn, contribute to evidence required at the heart of the research. For example, the statement, “Programming will place libraries more at the center of their communities,” suggests numerous questions:

- What are some of the current relationships between program content and community needs that are being effectively addressed?
- How are libraries “listening” to their communities?
- How are audiences segmented to address emerging issues?
- Who else is at the center of the community?
- How are library programs changing to meet emerging needs?
- What are the most effective research tools or instruments to gather this information?

WHY DO YOU, OR WHY DOES YOUR LIBRARY, THINK PROGRAMMING IS WORTHWHILE?
READ RESPONSES AND PROVIDE YOUR OWN FEEDBACK AT NILPPA.ORG

Program Development: Key Issues

The first workshop in Philadelphia in January 2014 covered considerable ground in describing the types, audiences, and goals for library programming. Missing from their analyses were discussions of how public programming decisions are made. What are the best practices to guide this process and how might they differ from one type of program to another?

Following this first meeting, scholar and librarian Dr. David Carr distributed his personal notes in which he wrote, “A public library is constructed for use by the people. Its purpose is to address a community’s character and needs, and to anticipate its changes. Its services and collections serve the common wealth in that place. And by its presence and programs, it creates something that lives.”
Carr’s comments address a primary theme, regardless of the type of library being discussed, that occurred throughout the advisors’ conversations: Programming is effective to the degree it serves the authentic needs and interests of its target participants.

There are several program-development models through which libraries seek to meet these needs and interests. The development of library programs generally fall into three categories:

1. Programs developed at the local/branch or college/university level by the library staff;
2. Programs developed and distributed by a regional or national entity; and
3. Collaborative or culturally co-created programs, developed through partnerships.

The second group of workshop participants examined each of these program types, defining elements of strengths and weaknesses of each. They sought to define elements of success unique to each type. To some degree, the participants found little difference in the impact based on how the program was developed. Overall, the success of a program had far more to do with its relevance and relationship to audience interests. For evaluation of these programs, they continued to look to such indicators as attendance, engagement in the topic, follow-up “buzz,” and repeat visitation.

There were, however, some notable differences. Locally developed programs, for example, were seen to have the advantage of flexibility, targeting audience needs quite specifically. If well received, they can become part of a series that continues to build audiences. They afford the opportunity to connect to collections, local events, new population groups, and current issues. The effectiveness of local programs can build community support and increase funding as well.

Beyond audience, however, success can also be defined by the impact on the institution itself. Nationally distributed programs may particularly afford this benefit. They are generally adaptable to different sizes of communities, regardless of type of library. They link to issues of national interest. They are accompanied by such resources as bibliographies or templates that each library can use. These kinds of programs offer replicable models and sometimes direct training, leading to useful professional development. The challenge to each library, however, is to create the links between national issues and community concerns.

What, in your opinion, is the added value of hosting a state- or national-level program at your institution versus a program you create internally? Read responses and provide your own feedback at NILPPA.org.
Both project workshops emphasized the need for libraries to understand community issues. Because libraries are perceived as neutral spaces, they can present difficult or controversial topics. The groups likewise stressed, however, that programs do not all have to be about critical issues. They can be designed for entertainment and pleasure, to bring together individuals who share a specific interest, or to teach new hobbies or crafts. Programming librarians can look at their populations as “prisms” and develop different kinds of programs to fit each audience’s interests.

The selection and development of programs does not appear to have a widely shared or well-defined process. Some libraries, especially those with a small or overburdened staff, report being largely reactive, building programming around availability in many instances. The best-case scenarios were defined as programming that combines opportunity with strategic direction, resources, and feasibility.

The NILPPA research framework should include an inquiry into how best to establish a framework and process for developing and presenting library programs. This process would retain the potential for flexibility and regional customization, but establish some useful guidelines. Research should learn how programming librarians select program topics and prioritize staff time, providing insight into existing best practices.

The Case for Collaboration

“No one should kid themselves . . . collaboration is not fluffy work. It is hard, frustrating, and unremittingly real, but it’s worthwhile and absolutely essential in this new age,” wrote Caroline Marshall more than a decade ago. Marshall, an experienced strategic planning consultant to cultural institutions, would receive no argument from those engaged in the sensitive work of bringing together multiple partners toward a common goal. The benefits of collaborative programming received great attention in the Chicago advisory workshop.
The following were listed as advantages of collaboration:

- The ability to reach new audiences. Each partner brings a potentially different segment of the community to program experiences, allowing for establishing new connections;
- Enlarged capacities and expanded skills. Not only may partners offer complementary skills, they may also have services, locations, technology, and other assets that broaden the library’s capacities, and they may teach by example in ways that have a lasting impact on the library;
- Greater attention, attraction, and publicity. Each partner brings new marketing outlets and connections, as well as media relationships;
- Expanded perspectives. Different audiences and their leadership provide a variety of fresh ways to view other people’s experience, values, and issues;
- Ability to create and nurture more relationships. From introduction to building value, the project may expand into additional partnerships and more fruitful community contacts;
- Greater ability to respond to demographic shifts. Partnering with different interest and ethnic groups and those that serve newcomers offers a way into reaching and responding to their needs;
- Opportunity to build something totally new. Combined resources and skills, new audiences, and different creative ability all offer the potential to create something entirely new, from products to organizations;
- A chance to energize staff. No matter how good an organization is, the staff can find the work repetitive. New ideas, new people, and fresh opportunities can energize and enliven staff participation;
- A first point of contact for potential library users. A community collaboration can introduce people to the library and its services for the first time or in a different way, offering the possibility of expanded use;
- A position in the community. New partners may help place libraries more at the center of their communities, bringing them to the table of decision-making and leadership; and
- New eyes and ears to recognize community needs. Even though libraries have long been excellent barometers of community changes and needs, having more input from different sectors widens that ability.

The conversation concurred that the great advantage of a collaborative program is that the process and product become far more than the sum of its parts. Even with a largely positive assessment, however, some questions surfaced to raise a cautious note. These included:

- Who owns the project or program?
- How is control and decision-making shared?
- How do all partners share in the risks of collaborations? The recognition?
- Since collaboration requires extra effort, how do we determine that the results are of special value?

It was agreed that there are numerous resources to help create and manage collaborations, but that research into the impact of collaboration is needed. How can we test that the assumed benefits are achieved? And what conditions support this achievement?
The multiple impacts of collaboration should be identified and measured by the NILPPA research studies to validate and strengthen the benefits of collaboration. Partners themselves may be important providers of data.

WHAT HAS BEEN YOUR MOST SUCCESSFUL/UNSUCCESSFUL COLLABORATION AND WHY?
READ RESPONSES AND PROVIDE YOUR OWN FEEDBACK AT NILPPA.ORG

The Intuitive Library

Librarians have long been identified as intuitive trend watchers. “What we do well,” noted one NILPPA advisor, “is analyze the gaps in community needs. We have become known for that.”

As one of the most democratic of all public institutions, libraries are obligated to serve people of all ages, economic strata, education level, ethnicity, religions, and walks of life. It is therefore imperative that librarians are attuned to changes in the community environment. They have long used the community data that tracks demographic changes and increasing diversity, and have often been the “first responders” to major social and cultural shifts that require new services and the availability of new skills, technology and information. To be effective in this role, libraries have to stay informed of the community’s goals related to academic achievement, immigration, economic development, health needs, and other core issues so that they can align with them in their core work.

Librarians easily adapt to emerging needs. Rather than being threatened by the profound changes in how people access information through technology, librarians set up programs and facilities to teach people how to use technology more effectively. When unemployment skyrocketed, librarians responded by creating job centers, organizing the data and training that aided so many to search for new jobs. They taught users how to write cover letters, prepare resumes, acquire new skills, and reposition themselves to survive the depressed times. As complicated new government programs were unveiled, librarians became experts in enabling people to apply for plans offered by the Affordable Care Act, understand the DREAM Act, and even prepare their income taxes. As more parents joined the workforce, libraries opened their doors to students, providing afterschool programming and social activities in a safe environment. As immigrants settled into new communities, librarians reached out to meet their information needs. Over and over, librarians have demonstrated their “high antennae” for perceiving community needs and organizing responses.

These skills don’t just come with the job — they are part of librarian’s commitment to service and their use of community information. Several advisors spoke about ways to enhance this community sensitivity as an important part of the growing use of programming.
The ideas presented included:

- The development of advisory boards made up of a cross-section of the community;
- Outreach to specific groups as the opportunity to present special programs emerges;
- Outreach to organizations serving underrepresented groups; and
- Requests for a place at the table of community development.

It was further suggested that libraries might promote themselves as models for listening to the community and become places that other organizations seek out for information about changes. By assuming a more public role as the barometer of significant community needs, libraries could become even more essential to others who interface with the public interests, including museums, cultural institutions, city and regional governments, etc.

The NILPPA research framework should include opportunities to identify and analyze best practices in community outreach and information gathering to be shared with the field.

HOW WELL DO YOU THINK YOUR LIBRARY KNOWS YOUR COMMUNITY?
READ RESPONSES AND PROVIDE YOUR OWN FEEDBACK AT NILPPA.ORG
The Programming Librarian

“We used to look at programming as a way to get people in and then get them to read. Now programming is one of our core learning experiences,” noted one of the advisory workshop participants. “Now that programming has become central to what we do, we need more training and assessment.”

Both advisory groups raised the question, “Does public programming require a standalone set of skills?” One participant responded with Ranganathan’s fifth law\(^1\) of library science: that the library is a growing organism, and its definition is constantly evolving. As librarians perceive the need for new forms of access to information, they respond with fresh ways to serve their populations. The growth of programming demonstrates the library’s organic nature.

An effect of that growth is that the library professional who steps into the role of programming librarian has rarely received specific training. As one participant put it, “Collections were the initial core of the library and were accompanied by great methodology. Programs came second, but are not supported by enough methodology.”

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Today, in small libraries, the job may be done by a single professional. Large urban libraries may support multi-person programming staffs. In academic libraries community engagement or outreach librarian positions carry heavy collaboration and programming responsibilities.

What are the core competencies of an effective programming librarian? Are schools of library science offering specific training in this area? In addition to strong familiarity with library collections and core services, a programming librarian needs strong interpersonal skills, the ability to negotiate with potential partners, a deep relationship with the community, and the sensitivity to deal with difficult issues. In recent years, some librarians have taken courses in facilitation, a skill that is increasingly required in the programming arena.

**The identification of core competencies, training needs, and best practices of programming librarians should be included in the research framework, along with guidelines for incorporating such training in schools of library science.**

**Research Audience**

The stated goal for developing and implementing a comprehensive research framework is “to ensure all library stakeholders have access to information they need to make strategic policy and investment decisions that will further leverage the infrastructure and expertise that flow from libraries’ public programming.” The ultimate goal is to provide optimal benefit to the individuals and communities that are the participants in exemplary public programming in libraries. Thus, comprehensive research will guide library practice and create public value.
As recognized in previous sections of this white paper, evaluation is a powerful management tool. It can provide internal governance and management with information useful to make critical budget, hiring, and resource allocation decisions. It can measure the effectiveness of different kinds of programs and offer ways to improve their benefit. Evaluation can also provide the kind of data and evidence that influences decision makers across the community, impacting library funding in multiple ways. It shifts the library’s reporting from anecdotal and quantitative information to evidence of deep impact in individual and community growth and competence.

Research results will be designed to support advocacy, to guide management, to elicit community support and institutional engagement, and to encourage community advancement. Funders and policy makers are likely to look to research and evaluation reports to determine the value of their investments in libraries and the policies that enable them to flourish. Librarians will be offering comparative data to support their role and significance in a community’s identity and to further the all-important leadership commitment to building equitable access to lifelong learning. Astute programming by libraries will recognize and respond to the complexity and diversity of society, highlighting community needs to political leadership and creating partnerships that benefit all constituents.

A well-structured research framework should provide insight into the library’s extraordinary role of identifying community needs. Research will create a live “data feed” for policymakers so they better understand on-the-ground realities as they develop annual plans and budgets. The listening role of libraries can help map the social needs of communities, identifying local and national topics of concern to voters. People turn to libraries when they need information. Research results can build even greater trust. Providing documented evidence of impact may intensify the role that libraries play as community barometers and help guide policy decisions that benefit their publics.

A comprehensive research framework may explore best practices of those libraries that have gained a seat at the table of community and institutional governance and policymaking, and examine the community connections and services that have earned them that respect.

Assuring Participation

While it would seem that the multiple benefits of designing and initiating a comprehensive research framework would assure widespread participation across the library field, there are many potential barriers. The first is likely the fear of the process becoming burdensome. How will libraries feeling the weight of recent cutbacks free up staff to participate? How will the research process fit into the already
heavy burden of completing numerous required surveys? How can the process meet the differing needs of small and large libraries, urban and rural libraries, academic and school libraries, contrasting geographic locations, and purposes that vary from serving specific academic needs to urban outreach? What will be the best way to “get the word out” across the library field?

These questions grounded both advisor conversations. As participants wrestled with defining program audiences, intended outcomes, program types and multiple variants, they also sought common ground and methods for mitigating differences. Their thoughts included:

- Build on existing research. Identify related fields, such as social sciences, that have already undertaken related research;
- Employ multiple research methods, from brief iPad surveys that could be used at professional meetings to preparing detailed case studies. Give everyone a way to participate;
- Encourage libraries to opt in at their own comfort levels, serving both to provide information based on individual strengths and to pose the questions most important to them;
- Keep the research framework accessible to all types of libraries through prioritized questions, common and shared language, and ease of responding;
- Incorporate practical tools within the research materials, so that participating in the research provides useful instruction and guidance;
- Use electronic formats, adding questions to current research and standard reports and entering data in a single, easily accessible place;
- Divide up research targets: national survey; early adopters; best practices; profile of a library programmer; collaborative program components;
- Engage the full spectrum of library-related professional organizations to feature sessions at regional and national meetings, articles in publications, and highlights wherever possible;
- Invite commentary and participation from such related organizations and agencies as IMLS, the National Endowment for the Humanities, National Academies, American Association for State and Local History, National Archives and Records Administration, and the National Council for Public History; and
- Engage some key partners and early adopters for some early wins.

Given the many demands already facing libraries today, the NILPPA research framework should place a minimal burden on participating libraries by being as flexible as possible, providing multiple options for involvement, and catering to a broad range of library types, sizes, and budgets.

The ALA staff is committed to keeping the planning process as open and transparent as possible. Libraries will be well informed of its progress and purposes even before their participation is requested.
As the research framework takes shape, input is welcome from across the field. There is clear recognition that the data collected and the findings reported must resonate with the needs of all library types. Although this project is complex, the results will provide welcome guidance for ongoing programming, based on evidence that library programming is already a vital and growing service across the country.

Research Methods and Next Steps

- A Note on Ethics -

Dr. David Carr has framed the argument that evaluation requires that a phenomenon must be either askable or observable\(^2\). This methodological simplification reveals a conundrum in light of this research project because the ethics of librarianship seem to oppose efforts to ask or observe individuals as they seek out information relevant to their lives. This resistance is not without sound reasoning. The principles that created the nation’s libraries and librarians’ professional and tacit codes of ethics have been fundamentally challenged by moral debates surrounding titles held by libraries and intrusive efforts to monitor, track, and persecute the learning behaviors of individuals. The library profession holds fast to the ethical principle that users have an absolute and inviolable right to privacy, and the interpretation of this ethical stance poses a challenge for the study of impacts and outcomes that accrue from library programs.

In developing a comprehensive research framework, researchers must be mindful of the unique ethics of the library profession. Care must be taken to develop tools that librarians can use without fear of compromising patrons’ privacy.

During our first meetings in Philadelphia, advisors Dr. Janine Golden of the University of Southern California and Professor Manju Prasad-Rao of Long Island University commented on the complexity of addressing library professionals’ belief that asking questions alone would meet resistance from across the field. They noted that communities rife with cultural conflict or where a minority community might feel stigmatized were most likely to resist asking questions about library use. Specifically, their experience indicated that library professionals would prevent, avoid, or work around participation in data collection from program participants if they perceived the methods as violating the right to privacy.

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While the federal regulations for the protection of human subjects in research (45 CFR Part 690: Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects) established rights of individuals and the reasonable right to privacy in research, library professionals hold these ethics close to their hearts and that interpretation may impact results from studies.

As a caveat to this perceived resistance to conducting research with public program participants, Terrilyn Chun of Multnomah County (Ore.) Library and Henry Fortunado of the Kansas City (Mo.) Public Library, both leading thinkers in program delivery, claimed that their institutions are actively involved in gathering data to assess impact and outcomes from most of their activities. This suggests that any effort to assess public programs at a library or system level may find early adopters willing to participate in national studies, but may possibly exclude a class of libraries whose values are challenged by any attempt to document users’ experience. Researchers controlling for excluded classes of individuals or groups must make special efforts to ensure the final data does not represent a systemic bias through omission.
We explored this challenge during the second set of meetings and asked our advisory group to consider strategies that could deeply investigate the library public program phenomenon, to track closely to the lived experience of library professionals, and to protect the data from interpretation that might bias the results or omit an important class of users. In guiding thinking about research methods, this second convening identified key concepts that would inform any national research framework. As a community, our advisors suggested that there is broad interest in exploring the range of programs and that those delivering programs are skilled observers of user behavior, and are therefore a possible rich source of synthesized data that would protect the rights of users. Others suggested that the vast quantity of programs alone could provide a significant source of information when aggregated on behalf of the collective. Still others believed there may be a complex array of program offerings that could be mapped to identify a “fingerprint” for each institution as a contributor to the national discourse on libraries. Based on feedback from these leaders in library scholarship, we have identified a series of recommended strategies for exploring both NILPPA and to help outline ways that libraries themselves might be able to undertake efforts they find ethically palatable and contribute to the national dialogue.

- Mixed Methods -
Adult public programming covers a broad swath of knowledge worlds—from humanities programming like film series or campus-wide reading and discussion groups, to practical efforts to run classes on tax preparation or business plan writing. The twenty-first century library is rapidly evolving in the public eye, but there is little baseline data on how libraries are perceived. Programming is clearly changing how libraries may be perceived by their users, yet terms like “library-like environment,” referring to quiet spaces, often draw on an outdated metaphor of what occurs in and around libraries that engage in rich programming and community-building efforts. To find reliable baseline data, it is necessary for the following framework to describe a strategy for aggregating information, helping to map the
range of programming types offered by libraries, and how these experiences might be shifting the national narrative. To both characterize this situation and to understand the texture and variation of public understanding so it can be useful to those in the field, this framework recommends using both qualitative and quantitative strategies—an approach referred to as mixed-methods research. It is intended to be useful to innovators who are pushing the limits and wish to describe their impact and for those who seek to see how their programs and communities are situated in the national discourse.

American culture is heterogeneous. It may have dominant trends, but its regions face different cultural, economic, and social pressures; while its population may be represented in aggregate, there is no predictable pattern for where innovators and agents for change might find themselves inspired by a program at a library. Therefore, in the following sections, we recommend an assessment strategy that can be pursued to characterize the range of program offerings, a backdrop quantitative approach for understanding general trends, and a parallel set of investigations into the range, depth, and breadth of programs to more fully represent local conditions, key methods that respect the privacy rights of users, and a strategy for establishing baseline data related to programming experiences that can be used by individual libraries, library systems, and national associations to assess programming impacts.

- The Changing Perception of Libraries -

New York Public Library president Anthony Marx put it bluntly: “Books are a 500-year-old delivery system for providing access to information. We aren't getting out of the book business, but now we are providing new ways to access information.”4 In fact, this trend has emerged nationwide, as public libraries have shrunk the proportion of their print materials in favor of growing other services and parts of the collection.5 Contemporary library services are discordant with social narratives that characterize how people use and interact with these essential cultural institutions, which leads to lack of awareness of programs and reduces the ability of both libraries and library science programs to characterize how purposes are achieved.

To address this concern, the NILPPA planning process identified the need to broadly characterize what the public believes about library programs, and how public programming is shifting public understanding about the nature of library services. To accomplish this goal, it is important to think comprehensively as a sector and to situate individual libraries and library systems in that larger landscape.

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- A National Impact Study Strategy -

Based on these explorations into the methods and strategies for assessing national-level impacts of programming in the United States, the goals of the following research methods are explicitly aimed at understanding aggregate impact. This suggests that, across a vast number of U.S. libraries, impacts may vary and individual institutions represent a range of outcomes. As a representative population of library programs, the amount of data from any individual institution need not be large. Rather, as a sector, it is possible for many libraries to participate in census-type data collection, individual case study, or impact day sampling that can generate a robust database that can be mined and analyzed for a wide variety of impacts without undue burden on any institution. Moreover, this research strategy would not require complex training in social science research methods.

If only the academic libraries in the country contributed one questionnaire with a randomly selected program participant and one fairly detailed programming professional report on impact of a specific program type to a centrally managed database, researchers could undertake detailed statistical analysis, link these data to baseline program offering statistics, census data, and other community-level metrics to provide robust contribution evidence of how specific types of programs, or programming in general, is having impact in communities. Therefore, this planning phase has recommended a three-phase roll-out of an ongoing assessment program that will create usable data and data tools that can support programming professionals and provide an ongoing reporting mechanism that speaks to impact and evolution of library programming into the future.

- Notes on Methods -

The common social narrative surrounding reliable research is often assumed to reference a medical epidemiological model that involves randomized controlled trials (RCTs) as a gold standard for explaining causation. In these studies, all factors are treated as equal within a given population and the only variable is a treatment or treatment regimen. In the social sciences, however, researchers seek to explain the truth of a situation and to characterize how unique cultural and social pressures or conditions might account for different outcomes. Variation within any specific cultural group is sufficiently large to suggest that causation may not be the best test of a specific intervention, but rather, that a more open process that considers contribution of an experience to larger change might be assessed by looking at the wide variety of variations within communities.

One of the major drawbacks to applying the epidemiological controlled testing strategies in free-choice learning at a library is the stabilization of the actual study frame—that is, the specific population that experiences the same condition. Prior to the understanding that all cancers were similar, it was common to exclude from tests either a gender or ethnic heritage as variables, which have since proven to have substantial impact on response to treatments. Similarly with library programs, all social factors—including
gender or gender identity of attendees, or unique conditions of one community that surrounds a specific event or program that are not replicated due to socioeconomic variation or even the weather in another community, and/or other social factors—can influence any exploration of a phenomenon for each of the participants in a particular event. A first experience with a poetry reading is likely to be completely different for someone who has enjoyed book group activities than it is for someone who has never been to a book discussion before. Therefore, this framework outlines a research strategy that establishes a general sampling frame as the entire population that might be accounted for in research. It also focuses on trying to explain the range of experiences that are possible, to characterize variation within the field and then use that variation to explore versions of programs to help understand the range, depth, and breadth of impact rather than narrowly attribute a change to a generic lowest common denominator “program” that does not represent the richness of the field.

While it would be convenient to consider “the general public” as a “simple” sample frame, our advisor meetings revealed that the sample frame, of necessity, for any overall assessment would require a stratified sampling frame. In the creation of a research framework, three communities should be consulted: programming participants, library users who do not attend or who avoid public programs, and library non-users. Each offers a unique perspective into this project.

Within these three unique groups, we suggest that various conditions, including program facilitator, tradition of program presentation at a library, and other factors, may surface unique outcomes or impacts from programs that are attributable to these variations. That is not to say that the impacts will be negative or positive, but rather, that the users’ experience of the program and the impact on them may be received in different and unique ways that are all useful in understanding the possibilities that can accrue from any event. Based on this categorization of communities, and irrespective of any national sampling strategy, we suggest that a “simple” sampling scheme for any national survey would need to compare across these community categories to identify how discourse is changing – as a backdrop to fully explore how individuals are using their libraries.

Based on this stratified sampling scheme and the recognition that varied programming types appeal to different communities and cultural sectors, this report recommends that a parallel set of studies be undertaken first to characterize the general narratives that surround libraries, and how these narratives are shifting as a result of expanded programming by libraries with consideration of community level cultural variation and type of library.
- Proposed Research Plan -

The following three-phase research plan will create usable data and data tools that can support programming professionals and provide an ongoing reporting mechanism that speaks to impact and evolution of library programming into the future. Through these three phases, competencies of programming professionals will start to emerge and mature to ensure programming practice is becoming part of the overall principle of library literacy, mapping the growth of professional practice and feeding a national dialogue with useful data that can help the profession grow as a whole.

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<tr>
<th>PHASE I: MAPPING THE TERRAIN* (YEARS 1-2)</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Activities</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Aims to:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Characterize the range, breadth, and depth of program types and experiences.</td>
<td>What do we already know about the field of programming?</td>
<td>Review of existing tools and data already collected (e.g., IMLS Public Libraries in the United States library survey)</td>
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<td>• Identify how libraries can participate in a collective effort.</td>
<td>What is the range of needs currently being addressed by public programming? How are programming librarians determining those needs?</td>
<td>Library users (and non-users) contribute to a baseline study of current program attendance and interests</td>
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<td>• This effort will include public, academic, and special libraries.</td>
<td>How can libraries be organized according? Will population served and program type be sufficient? (e.g., rural libraries who do early literacy programs)</td>
<td>Libraries contribute data about their programs and populations served through a nationwide survey that allows for “mapping the terrain”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>What’s the capacity of each library to collect data?</td>
<td>Each library is recognized for what it can indicate about the field at large and starts to monitor those things (Every library doesn’t have to measure everything!)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>How do library users (and non-users) feel about current programs?</td>
<td>Data aggregation will document the collaborative capacity of the library field</td>
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### PHASE II: GOING DEEPER WITH DATA (YEARS 3-5)

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<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Libraries collecting representative data will continue to contribute to a better understanding of programming</td>
<td>How is library public programming facilitating and/or being facilitated through community collaboration?</td>
<td>Mixed methods (qualitative and quantitative) that involve representative sampling of program impacts</td>
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<td>• In-depth case studies offer a unique view into innovative programs that are pushing the envelope.</td>
<td>What are the range of impacts – personal, institutional, and community-wide – that can be described and assessed?</td>
<td>Deep ethnographic studies using focus groups and interviews of libraries doing adventurous programming (spending time with them to document and tell their stories)</td>
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<td>What additional factors may influence programming decisions (such as staffing resources or community livability standards)?</td>
<td>Building a growing database that keeps track of program impacts over time and enables national trend analysis.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>What can case studies demonstrate about the complexities, values, and impacts of public programming?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>What are the professional skills needed to create impactful programming?</td>
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### PHASE III: DEVELOPING A MODEL (YEARS 6-8)

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<th>Description</th>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Activities</th>
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<td>The approach in this phase seeks to explain:</td>
<td>How can public programming be characterized to build greater institutional support for libraries from across the community?</td>
<td>Identify trends and patterns in the data being reported by libraries and making predictions about the levers that result in specific outcomes</td>
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<tr>
<td>• How programming responds to change in ways that impact overall quality of life;</td>
<td>How can the data collected be used to build a predictive model?</td>
<td>Link local findings to state and national impacts</td>
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<td>• How programming affects the perception of libraries in a rapidly changing society, helping libraries direct their energies toward the most useful and practical types of programs in their communities; and</td>
<td></td>
<td>Establish a robust data center for continued data monitoring and publishing reports (annual trends report)</td>
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<td>• How programming might predict change in communities.</td>
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