

Our project, Leveraging Use of Open Data by Public Library Staff for Community Benefit (IMLS LG-246255-OLS-20), explored questions regarding the challenges and potential benefits of the use of open data by public library staff. For more information about other project activities, please visit our project site at:

<https://tascha.uw.edu/projects/leveraging-use-of-open-data-by-public-library-staff-for-community-benefit/>

For the first phase of our project, we interviewed 19 public library staff, plus 6 representatives from state library agencies and open data projects. This summary focuses on only the interviews with public library staff. The interview questions are listed at the end of this document. For a summary of the interviews with the other types of staff, please visit the project web site.

High-level observations:

- Most library programming planning was driven by qualitative data, primarily through staff/patron interaction or feedback on existing programming. Additionally, internal library data often played a role in determining which programs or services to offer such as historical program attendance data and internal resource data such as staff and resource availability.
- Libraries have a diverse network of partners that they work with in a variety of ways to assist in delivering programs. This can range from exchanging information with staff at partner organizations to a deeper involvement in planning and delivering programs. The depth of involvement can vary across each partner depending on their capacity and interest.
- Library staff are very interested in understanding why community members are not using the services of the library or attending library programs and what drives this lack of engagement with the library.
- Few interviewees responded with a specific example of data they were unable to find about their community, although many did mention that finding data at the right level of specificity or currency was sometimes a challenge.

Interview Participants

- What do their communities look like?
 - 4 staff were from communities that had a “Rural” locale designation ranging in population from 2,000 to 25,000
 - 3 staff were from communities that had a “Suburban” locale designation ranging in population from 20,000 to 22,000
 - 5 staff were from communities that had a “Town” locale designation ranging in population from 8,000 to 22,000
 - 7 staff were from communities that had a “City” locale designation ranging in population from approximately 65,000 to 1,400,000

Our opening questions (Q1-3) were to help us understand the role of the library staff person within their organization, what role, if any, they played in program planning, and particular programs that they had been involved in planning or implementing.

- Library staff roles ranged from director and other senior management positions to adult and children's services librarians. 7 interviewees had a director title; 5 had an associate / assistant / functional unit director title; 6 had an adult / children's services or similar title; and one had a data-focused title.
- Most of the interviewees directly implemented programming in their libraries for their respective audiences (e.g. adult or children). For larger systems, the interviewees at a management level described being involved from a planning and strategic viewpoint, but usually not involved in direct implementation of programming. For smaller libraries, management staff often fulfilled differing roles depending on the changing needs of the library and available resources.

Our next set of questions focused more on the process for planning of programs, including data collection, if applicable.

Q4: How did you or your colleagues choose these particular programs and services?

Key points:

- "Organic" was a term used by multiple interview participants to describe serendipitous ideas springing from informal interactions with patrons or staff
- Library staff often turned to patron feedback and interactions as a starting point for choosing programs
- Program ideas were also generated through discussions with library colleagues
- Many interviewees talked about local relationships (with schools, non-profits, other governmental agencies) that they relied upon to check their assumptions about the community and community needs
- Some participants mentioned filtering ideas through a strategic or service plan after initial idea generation

Q5: Do you currently work with partners to deliver any of these programs or services?

Key points:

- All staff reported working with partners to deliver programs in their communities
- The roles of partners ranged from exchanging information to directly assisting with program implementation
- Partners mentioned most often included:
 - Economic development agencies including Chambers of Commerce and other State agencies focused on either workforce development or economic development
 - Schools and school districts - many participants actively partnered with the schools on a variety of programs or as part of ongoing services
 - Other local government departments such as parks and recreation, senior service center, fire and police departments, and early childhood center

- Non-profits - a range of non-profit organizations, including the YWCA, arts organizations, food pantry, Salvation Army, and garden clubs
- Education partners beyond K-12 were also mentioned, including community colleges and 4-year universities

Q6: What information do you seek when planning a new program or service?

Key points:

- Library staff turn to internal data, especially program attendance data
- Library staff also regularly use patron interactions and staff discussions as information points in the planning process

Q7: What do you wonder about your library's community?

Key points:

- Library staff think a lot about the non-users of the library in their community
- The responses spoke to a strong desire to understand the motivations, aspirations, and challenges of their community and how the library could contribute to helping people realize their personal and community vision.

Q8: What opportunities and what challenges are you seeing in your library's community right now?

Key points:

- COVID-19 has brought on a new set of challenges, especially in balancing offering more virtual programs while still offering traditional services while adjusting to different staffing levels or work settings
- Opportunities for new program ideas, partnerships, and potentially new users have also come about because of COVID-19
- Many respondents mentioned that the opportunity / challenge is often two sides of the same coin.

Q9: Where do you turn for information when you want to find out something about your community?

Key points:

- Library staff responded with a variety of different sources for information that they turn to when gathering information about their community from traditional quantitative sources to qualitative data gathered from patron interactions
 - Online sources most frequently mentioned included the Census; school district websites; and general internet searches.
- External partners are another key source of information
 - Examples mentioned included school districts, immigrant resource centers, senior centers, community health organizations, and chambers of commerce.

Q10: Have you looked for data or information about your community that you weren't able to find?

Key point:

- Most respondents did not point to specific pieces of data they could not find
- Some data is not current enough or specific enough for a community

Appendix

Questions for interview of public library staff:

1. Can you please describe your role at your organization?
2. Do you work at more than one physical location? If yes, how many locations do you currently work at?
3. Do you participate in program or service development or implementation? If so, What programs have you participated in developing or implementing in the past two years?
4. How did you or your colleagues choose these particular programs and services?
5. Do you currently work with partners to deliver any of these programs or services?
6. What information do you seek when planning a new program or service?
7. What do you wonder about your library's community?
8. What opportunities and what challenges are you seeing in your library's community right now?
9. Where do you turn for information when you want to find out something about your community?
10. Have you looked for data or information about your community that you weren't able to find?
11. Can we follow up with you if we have further questions?