Introduction

In 2017, the American Library Association (ALA) and Knology (a nonprofit dedicated to advancing practical social science) launched a project called the National Impact of Library Public Programs Assessment (NILPPA). Supported by the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), NILPPA is built on the recognition that public libraries are playing an increasingly central role in community life all across the US—as centers of lifelong learning, as social service providers, and as gathering places for conversation and innovation. This transformation in the role of libraries has been fueled by the dramatic growth of public programming, which has become more and more prominent since ALA established its Public Programs Office (PPO) in 1992. NILPPA seeks to create a foundation for understanding library public programming, including its varieties and characteristics, its impacts, and the kinds of competencies, skills, and forms of knowledge library workers need to carry out programs that empower communities and improve lives. Specifically, NILPPA addresses questions such as:

- What does library programming look like?
- What training do library workers need to create and host successful programs?
- What are the key indicators that demonstrate the impacts of library programming?
- How are libraries partnering with other organizations to achieve that impact?

In addition to generating data tied to these questions, NILPPA's purpose is to analyze and disseminate those data in ways that support and guide the field's continuing embrace of public programming. Whether shared as reports, position papers, peer-reviewed publications, web articles and blog posts, resource kits, or guidebooks, NILPPA research findings are designed with two goals in mind: (a) to help library workers make informed decisions about how and where to invest their programming resources, and (b) to equip libraries with the information, tools, and understandings needed to successfully fulfill their roles as civic and cultural hubs. NILPPA is a thoroughly collaborative endeavor; contributors include not only Knology and ALA PPO staff, but also an advisory group of library practitioners and researchers whose experiences and expertise span varied populations, audiences, and library types. Information about the project's advisors can be found in the Appendix to this report.

Project History

The first phase of NILPPA research was conducted between 2017 and 2019. During this period, Knology and ALA PPO worked with advisors to understand the primary
characteristics, audiences, outcomes, and values of public library programming. Phase 1 addressed two key research questions:

- How can we characterize and categorize public programs offered by libraries today?
- What competencies and training are required for professionals working with library programming today?

Two outputs resulted from this phase of the project: (a) a conceptual framework for categorizing public programs, and (b) a resource outlining nine core competencies library workers need in order to create successful programs. Disseminated as visual tools through blogs, webinars, and conference presentations, these outputs collectively established a common language for understanding the varieties of public programming, while also providing guidance on the skills programming professionals need to effectively do their jobs. Key findings from Phase 1 were also communicated in a comprehensive report, a white paper, and two peer-reviewed articles—all of which helped lay the groundwork for Phase 2 of the project.

This Report

This report documents key activities and emerging findings from Phase 2 of NILPPA, which began in 2021. Phase 2 continues Knology and ALA PPO's collaborative research into the foundations of library public programming. While Phase 1 produced a shared understanding of programming types and competencies, Phase 2 focuses on two other foundational concepts: partnership and impact. Specifically, it seeks to understand how libraries work with partner organizations and identify indicators that resonate with the impacts libraries are trying to achieve through public programming. Key questions for Phase 2 are:

- How can we describe and categorize the range of community partnership models used by libraries?
- What key indicators can best demonstrate the local, state, and national impacts of library programming?

Addressing these questions, individual sections of this report document Phase 2 research processes and outcomes, offering insights into what impact looks like for libraries and communities as well as how libraries are partnering with other community organizations to achieve their desired impacts. In keeping with the project’s emphasis on actionable understandings and practical guidance, Phase 2 seeks to provide library workers with a collection of resources (including best practices, tools, and other learning materials) that help them forge effective partnerships that can be leveraged in service of their programming goals.
Activities and Findings

Research on Impact Areas

NILPPA Phase 2 began with two virtual workshops, in which project advisors and partners engaged in group discussions and break-out activities to develop a comprehensive list of the kinds of impacts library public programming can have. Held on October 28 and November 9, 2021, these workshops yielded agreement on nine key impact areas—that is, areas in which library programs can make a meaningful difference in people's lives and increase community wellbeing. The names of these impact areas were refined through subsequent research and deliberation. Ultimately, project advisors and partners agreed to call the impact areas as follows: (a) connected communities; (b) knowledgeable communities; (c) creative communities; (d) civically engaged communities; (e) healthy communities; (f) economically vital communities; (g) welcoming communities; (h) joyful communities; (i) caring communities.

A nationwide NILPPA survey randomly assigned library professionals one of the nine areas and asked if they felt the programming at their library could contribute to that area. (Note that we weren't asking if the impact had already occurred, just that it is a plausible outcome of their programming efforts.) If they agreed, they were then shown a list of more specific changes that would signal that overall impact. For example, more people attending arts programming at libraries or voting in support of arts funding could contribute to what we are calling “creative communities.” Each of the nine overall impact areas, along with the list of specific changes belonging to each, were thought to have face validity by survey respondents.

To prepare for actually measuring the changes that contributed to the nine impact areas, Knology researchers reviewed possible data sources (such as patron surveys, voter turnout records, business registrations, and the average income of people working in the arts). These will serve as quantitative indicators of the extent to which the impact manifests in communities. We decided that indicators could either be data collected by a library (i.e., direct measurement) or proxy metrics from some function of public data (i.e., indirect measurement). These are being further refined for use in the next phase of NILPPA.

Finally, Knology researchers developed a working definition and a series of keywords for each impact area, and identified representative examples of existing library programs tied to each of the nine areas. The combination of definitions, keywords, and examples are intended to help communicate the scope of each impact area to library programming professionals, funders of programming, as well as the general public.

All of this information was made publicly accessible through a series of blog posts. Published on the Knology website (knology.org), the NILPPA website (nilppa.org), and ALA’s Programming Librarian website (programminglibrarian.org), these impact-related blog posts are summarized below.
Connected Communities

*Connected communities* promote social capital by helping their members establish the kinds of social connections, relationships, and networks that facilitate communal trust, cooperation, and reciprocity, along with collective action.

*Keywords:* neighborliness, bonding, solidarity, shared values, social integration.

Knowledgeable Communities

*Knowledgeable communities* prioritize learning for its own sake, provide access to reliable information on a wide range of topics, and help their members develop the critical thinking capacities needed to make factual, evidence-based decisions.

*Keywords:* thoughtful, deliberate, reasoning, understanding, informed.

Creative Communities

*Creative communities* provide opportunities and resources for artistic self-expression, enable the pursuit of creative livelihoods, and help their members participate in all manner of cultural productions.

*Keywords:* artistic, nurturing, inventive, imaginative, productive.

Civically Engaged Communities

*Civically engaged communities* promote a vibrant public sphere and encourage their members to play an active role in civic life and community governance—whether through participation in political processes, group and association membership, or community service.

*Keywords:* democratic, participatory, transparent, responsible, dutiful.

Healthy Communities

*Healthy communities* promote equitable access to healthcare, the attainment of healthy living and working conditions, and other actions that improve health outcomes and help all of their members lead physically and mentally healthy lives.

*Keywords:* active, equitable, robust, safe, secure.

Economically Vital Communities

*Economically vital communities* seek to create the conditions that can lead to economic development, increased individual and collective financial wellbeing, and the equitable use of community goods, services, and natural and human resources.

*Keywords:* fair, equitable, lively, prosperous, growing.

Welcoming Communities

*Welcoming communities* promote the inclusion of newcomers, value cultural diversity, and take actions that help all of their members feel a sense of belonging.

*Keywords:* inclusive, nondiscriminatory, accessible, respectful, accepting, diverse.
Joyful Communities

*Joyful communities* create spaces where people can come together to have fun, be entertained, enjoy each other’s company, celebrate one another’s lives, and affirm both their histories and the futures they are making together.

*Keywords:* entertainment, amusement, pleasure, community spirit, pride.

Caring Communities

*Caring communities* promote prosocial values and behaviors, encourage their members to treat others with compassion and empathy, and help individuals develop a sense of social responsibility.

*Keywords:* kind, just, tolerant, considerate, sharing, charitable.

Research on Library Partnerships

Partnerships Survey

The two virtual workshops held at the outset of NILPPA Phase 2 also enabled the development of a survey module on library partnerships. The goal of this survey module was to gather data exploring what makes an effective library partnership. Rather than listing all of their partners, library professionals were asked to provide in-depth information on one exemplary partnership—that is, a single partnership they saw as particularly valuable in connection with their public programming efforts.

The survey information was distributed to state library associations throughout the US; shared with librarians who had participated in ALA PPO initiatives for the past three years; and distributed through mailing lists, including the following:

- Grantees working in public, college, school, and special libraries who received funding as part of ALA’s Libraries Transforming Communities: Focus on Small and Rural Libraries initiative,
- Members of ALA’s Programming Librarian Facebook Group,
- Members of the ALA affiliate American Indian Library Association (AILA),
- Members of the ALA division Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL),
- Members of the ALA division American Association of School Librarians (AASL), and
- Members of the Special Libraries Association (SLA).

The survey was administered through Qualtrics, and the link to it remained open for several months. A total of 364 libraries completed the module related to partnerships. The vast majority of these (325, or 89.3%) were public libraries, while the remaining respondents classified themselves as academic, K-12, special, and tribal libraries. In terms of their working hours, staff sizes, service areas and populations, and budgets, these 364 libraries varied considerably, and they were reflective of the institutional and operational diversity of the US library system as a whole. As they constituted a broad cross-section of the US library
landscape, the data provided by these 364 libraries served as a foundation for the production of generalizable knowledge applicable to libraries of different shapes and sizes.

Responses to the survey made it possible to classify library partners by type and category (e.g., those who focus on personal finance, media, wellness, etc.), and they provided an important check on researchers' initial assumptions and ideas. As with the research on impact areas, findings from the partnership survey module were publicly shared through a series of blog posts. Published on the Knology website, the NILPPA website, and ALA's Programming Librarian website, these posts discussed responses to a number of the survey's key questions. An introductory post provided some initial information on respondent demographics.

Each blog post concluded with a series of questions for library practitioners—questions that encouraged them to reflect on the extent to which findings from the partnership survey corresponded with their own library's experiences, needs, and expectations. These questions also inquired into the validity and usefulness of the partnership models shared within the blog posts. Each post included a graphical representation of a model for one aspect of partnerships, based on a thematic analysis of survey responses. These graphics were revised based on practitioner feedback to create a toolkit for libraries. The process of soliciting feedback on their relevance and appropriateness continued into the next phase of partnership research: a series of focus groups held with library practitioners.

The information below summarizes the contents of each partnership–related blog post.

**A Survey of Libraries: Tell us About your Community Partnerships**

Here, we review the survey's key questions and share information about the libraries that completed it. Results indicate that the survey reflects the diversity of the US library landscape, indicating that the partnership tools emerging out of Phase 2 will work for libraries regardless of their type, size, location, or operating contexts.

**Who do Libraries Serve? Defining the “Public”**

In this blog, respondents tell us who they think their programming audience is. Results indicate that libraries define their publics in many different ways. When considering who they serve, libraries are thinking about specific groups and the community on the whole.

**Health, Media, and More: What Partners Help Libraries Do**

This blog post highlights the topics library partnerships focus on. Survey results indicate that libraries are pursuing partnerships to create a wide range of programs, and that these programs often address many different topics.

**Sharing Expertise, Providing Space, and Raising Awareness**

Here, we explore how partnerships help libraries reach their programming goals. Survey results show that libraries are deeply invested in the partnerships they have forged and that they are collaborating in varied ways with partners.
Common Goals, Continuous Communication, and Teamwork

This blog post speaks to the question of what makes a library partnership effective. Survey results point to five key factors libraries have identified as crucial to the success of a partnership: strategic alignment, teamwork, regular communication, interpersonal skills, and operations management.

Better Programs, Deeper Impacts, and Expanded Capacities

Survey results suggest that partnerships bring multiple benefits to libraries, including program design, program planning, program implementation, program impact, and capacity building. This blog post describes how partnerships help libraries reach their programming goals.

Conversations with Library Practitioners

The partnership survey was followed up by in-depth focus groups with library practitioners. Participants were selected for the focus groups using a method that prioritized variation, ensuring that conclusions drawn from the focus group would deliver a comprehensive understanding of both partnerships and impact areas. During these meetings, researchers asked participants to imagine how they would use potential tools for developing and assessing community partnerships. The goal of these focus groups was to assess the extent to which survey findings and analysis resonated with individual library workers.

Four virtual conversations were held with practitioners in March 2023. Twelve individuals participated in the focus groups, representing two tribal libraries, two public libraries, two museum libraries, two school libraries, three academic libraries, and one state library. At each session, participants were introduced to the aforementioned partnership models and queried as to their usefulness. Conversations were transcribed and then analyzed to gauge:

- Overall reactions, including feedback as to how to design partnership tools that are most useful to library workers, and
- Reactions to each of the partnership models, including feedback on connections (i.e., the extent to which individual graphics resonated with participants’ experiences), potential uses (i.e., how participants envisioned using each resource in their work), and areas for improvement (i.e., how participants thought individual graphics could be altered to increase their utility).

Toolkit Construction

One of the primary outputs for NILPPA Phase 2 is a toolkit designed to help libraries forge, assess, and deepen their partnerships. Informed by findings from each of the above activities, the toolkit offers practical guidance for assessing partnerships at any stage of their development (be they potential, new, or established), and is structured to yield insights into the critical questions libraries ask about their collaborations with other community organizations. The toolkit includes five different tools, which can be used individually or in combination.
1. **Why do we work together? Determining goals**  
   A tool to help libraries think about the different community impacts their partnerships can have.

2. **What can we work on together? Determining focus areas**  
   A tool highlighting different topics library partnerships can focus on.

3. **What do we each bring to the table? Determining contributions**  
   A tool to help libraries identify what they need from a partner, and what partners might need from them.

4. **How do we work together? Determining partner interactions**  
   A tool to help libraries decide how to make the best possible use of their resources, and how to divide up responsibilities with partners.

5. **What does a successful partnership look like? Determining strengths and weaknesses**  
   A tool to help libraries identify what is and is not working in their partnerships.

The toolkit has three primary use cases: (a) **long-term strategic planning** (i.e., thinking broadly about partnerships as a whole); (b) **creating new partnerships** outside of formal strategic thinking processes; and (c) **evaluating or deepening existing partnerships**. To facilitate productive use of the toolkit in each of these scenarios, it includes a series of reflection questions for library staff and other key stakeholders (including board members and community partners), which are intended to promote collaborative, evidence-informed decision making. The toolkit also includes information about a number of additional resources that can help libraries plan programs and services that use partnerships to meet shared goals and deepen a library’s community impacts.

The toolkit exists as both a static, printable PDF and an interactive, online resource. The virtual version of the toolkit is available on the NILPPA website, and it gives users an opportunity to add to the project by providing anonymized feedback on how libraries are thinking about collaborative public programming. Serving as the basis for future reports, articles, blog posts, and other publications, libraries’ use of the toolkit will help set the stage for future NILPPA work.

To support use of the toolkit, project partners collaborated in the production of various **supplemental materials** designed to clarify and illustrate its value. The first of these is a series of short instructional videos offering a guided walkthrough of each of the five tools. Along with this, project partners are also creating a series of video testimonials highlighting the experiences of libraries who have used the toolkit. These video segments offer library practitioners an opportunity to describe how they have used individual tools and what benefits have resulted.

**Peer–Reviewed Papers**

In addition to the partnership toolkit, outputs for NILPPA Phase 2 have included writing two papers for publication in peer-reviewed journals. Both of these leverage data and insights gathered through the process of researching impact areas and library partnerships, and they both represent an attempt to expand on emerging findings in ways that provide a foundation for the third phase of the project.
How Partnerships Help Libraries Meet Diverse Community Needs: A Thematic Analysis

As previously noted, a key part of NILPPA Phase 2 was a survey that asked libraries to discuss examples of effective partnerships. One of the questions on this survey asked if their partnerships were helping libraries “meet the needs of diverse audiences.” A total of 347 libraries responded to this question, and their feedback offers insights into two important phenomena: (a) how libraries conceptualize and operationalize diversity; and (b) the extent to which partnerships are helping libraries connect with different groups in their communities. To share these insights, project partners are collaborating with Dr. Nicole A. Cooke, Augusta Baker Endowed Chair Professor at the University of South Carolina School of Information Science and a member of the NILPPA advisory team, on a peer-reviewed submission that analyzes and interprets responses to the survey’s “diverse audiences” question, alongside a consideration of who libraries consider their “publics” to be.

The aim of this study is to understand the extent to which partnerships add depth to libraries’ understandings of diversity and enhance their ability to build more equitable communities. Answering these questions advances understanding of the ways partnerships can help libraries connect with and meet the needs of specific groups in their communities—including historically and persistently marginalized groups. This paper contributes to library practice and the field of LIS by demonstrating how partnerships can empower libraries to develop collaborative programs that enhance equity between different groups in their communities.

Belief and Behavior: Using public opinion to measure the impacts of library public programming

This paper responds to a key research question identified in Phase 2 of the project: what key indicators can demonstrate the local, state, and national impacts of library programming? It argues for the value of public opinion as a way to determine the social impact of library public programming. This alternative measurement approach is intended to complement existing public data approaches to measuring impact, including voting records, health statistics, and student test scores. While these kinds of “hard” numbers offer a useful means of demonstrating the social value of libraries and other cultural institutions, they are difficult to connect to specific programming efforts and outcomes. Moreover, public data can be difficult to access and tends to be inconsistent for different impact areas—particularly at the local level, where it is often easiest to see evidence of library impacts. This paper argues for another option: public opinion about the areas in which library public programming strives for impact.

Public opinion can have predictive power. For example, in economics, the consumer confidence index (which measures the economic expectations of consumers) is regularly used as a bellwether for future economic activity. Measures like this can also be beneficial for libraries, because what people think influences how people act. For example, if you think you live in a connected community, your actions are likely to be friendly and prosocial, and you will go about making your community more connected. The public opinion measurement approach is based on the idea that belief–based action reshapes people's
communities. When complemented by public data on people’s behaviors, public opinion measures can be used to both assess the social changes to which library programs contribute and to help libraries strengthen their arguments for continued and expanded support during conversations with partners and funders.

**Implications**

The research conducted during NILPPA Phase 2 has created a foundation for exploring the impacts of library public programming. As others have noted, the task of measuring social impacts — that is, the effect library activities have “on the social fabric of a community and the wellbeing of the individuals and families who live there” (Philips & Wong, 2016) — is often “elusive and challenging” (MOMSI, 2021, p. 1). So too have libraries struggled to articulate their impacts in ways that convince others that they are accomplishing their goals. Answering calls for the creation of “more innovative approaches” (Norton et al., 2021, p. 80) to documenting and describing library impacts, NILPPA Phase 3 aims to equip libraries with the tools and resources needed to more effectively tell the story of their community impacts, whether locally, regionally, or nationally.

Specifically, NILPPA Phase 3 will build on the nine impact areas identified in the project’s second phase. To determine progress within these areas, we will gather a variety of overlooked data—including public opinion, attitudes, intentions, and expectations. Existing models for measuring libraries’ social impacts largely overlook this kind of data. But just as measurements of “consumer confidence” are used to understand economic conditions, public opinion measurements may help libraries better understand the impact of their public programs on community wellbeing and broader processes of social change. In NILPPA Phase 3, Knology and ALA PPO will collect these measurements through specific, item-level indicators developed and validated in the second phase of the project. Data tied to these indicators will be gathered through a mixture of rolling public polls and library cohorts.
Appendix

Advisors

NILPPA Phase 2 has relied on the insight of a team of advisors, both researchers and practitioners in the library field. This group included:

- Jennifer Weil Arns, Associate Professor, University of South Carolina
- Cassandra Barnett, Program Advisor for School Libraries, Arkansas State Board of Education
- Adriana Blancarte-Hayward, Senior Manager, Community Outreach and Engagement, New York Public Library
- Adrienne Coffey, Director, Nenana Public Library, Nenana, AK
- Nicole A. Cooke, Augusta Baker Endowed Chair and Associate Professor, University of South Carolina
- Teri Embrey, Director of Library Services, Pritzker Military Library, Chicago, IL
- Jody Gray, Associate University Librarian for Research, University of Minnesota Libraries
- Manju Prasad-Rao, Head, Instructional Media Center, Long Island University-LIU Post Campus
- Crystal Schimpf, Research and Learning Librarian for Business and Economics, Dartmouth College
- Mimosa Shah, Associate Curator, Schlesinger Library, Harvard Radcliffe Institute

Works summarized


