2016

Employing Community Feedback, New Technologies, and Best Practices for Increased Viability and Relevance

Kimberly Bolan Cullin
President and Principal Consultant of Kimberly Bolan & Associates, LLC, kim@rethinkinglibraries.org

Robert Cullin
Vice President and Principal Consultant of Kimberly Bolan & Associates, LLC., rob@rethinkinglibraries.org

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Recommended Citation

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Author Information

Kimberly Bolan Cullin is President and Principal Consultant of Kimberly Bolan & Associates, LLC and can be reached at kim@rethinkinglibraries.org. Robert Cullin is Vice President and Principal Consultant of Kimberly Bolan & Associates, LLC. He can be reached at rob@rethinkinglibraries.org. The Cullins presented at the New York Library Association Annual Conference and Trade Show, Lake Placid, NY, in October 2015.

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Abstract: To empower libraries to better understand—and positively change—the way the public views them and to help libraries retain current library users, attract new users, and convert former non-users, this general review offers in-depth analysis of some of the most common desires and complaints expressed by 9,000 library users and non-users from across the U.S. over an 18-month period.

This collected feedback includes discussion of "active v. quiet" spaces and increased demand for co-working and business centers; improved access to centralized electrical outlets; alternatives to Makerspaces, such as digital creativity spaces and curated, circulating activity kits; and an eagerness for more streamlined, "personalized" marketing communications from libraries. Self-service holds, outdoor workspaces, and a strong preference for flip-through shelving are also discussed. Further, the authors demonstrate ways in which libraries can incorporate such public input effectively and affordably by redeploying existing resources, reconfiguring library facilities, and by implementing newly available products, technologies, and best practices.

It must be noted that, because not all public insights shared in this general review may be applicable to every library, libraries are also encouraged to seek out localized public input and to incorporate widely available, state-reported benchmarking data from other libraries—especially during and after employing new strategic planning. Guidance around gathering and acting upon localized feedback from library users and non-users, as well as guidance around the use of state-reported data are also provided.

INTRODUCTION

Despite many libraries' best efforts to update facilities and evolve services, the public's general perception of libraries as having low utility and reduced relevance remains, in some cases, unchanged. To navigate—and, most importantly, to reverse—this trend, the library community must be willing to seek, collect, and act upon unvarnished user and non-user input.

Failure to do so can only result in widening the gap in the public's thinking around the inherent value of libraries. However, all too often, library leaders believe a new building or substantial budgetary surplus are necessary to reshape public perceptions.

This general review seeks to demonstrate that it is possible to successfully incorporate direct community feedback by redeploying a library's existing resources in clever ways. What's more, by implementing a few newly available technologies, reconfiguring existing library facilities is also a viable, affordable option. New best practices related to collected user feedback will also be presented.

METHODOLOGY

Working as library planning consultants since 2004, the authors have interviewed thousands of users and non-users and collaborated with hundreds of school, academic, and public libraries. The following insights reflect 30 libraries from communities across the U.S. and were gathered from 200 focus groups (3,000 participants) and 26 surveys (6,000 respondents) conducted during the last 18 months.

Explored here are some of the most common library user issues, including the need for "active" versus "quiet" spaces, increased demand for co-working and business centers, and access to additional electrical power, among others. Also presented are best practices for addressing common issues in creative, low-cost ways and new trends in library services and facilities developed to attract and retain library users.

Please note: any specific products and manufacturers mentioned in this general review are not expressly endorsed by the authors or *JLAMS*, the *Journal of the Leadership and Management Section*. Instead, newly emerging goods and companies have been introduced, in the event that readers wish to investigate them further for themselves.

ISSUE 1: 'ACTIVE' v. 'QUIET' SPACES

According to much of the available community feedback, demand for both "active" and "quiet" areas in libraries is a nearly universal complaint among people of all ages. While some users expect libraries to provide quiet spaces to work, others require a more "active," collaborative environment in which they can work on and discuss projects with peers.

Further complicating matters, increasing numbers of people are now using their local libraries as co-working spaces or business centers. They may spend many consecutive hours in study rooms or collaborative areas, making and taking phone calls and using large amounts of Internet bandwidth, potentially disturbing or frustrating other library users.

And this trend is only expected to grow. "The Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that by 2020, about 65 million Americans will be freelancers, temps, independent contractors and solopreneurs, making up about 40% of the workforce" (Lopez, 2013). To meet the demand for co-working spaces and to keep business-related activities from affecting other library users, some libraries are converting a portion of their study areas into dedicated business workspaces. These areas are designed to support the technology and work requirements of the growing population of business-conducting users.

User demand for active and quiet spaces also has been found to shift, depending on the time of day. As a result, flexible, modular solutions are needed.

In a library with distinct or easily separated wings or multiple floors, the most obvious solution to the active-quiet conundrum may be to designate large "active" and "quiet" portions of the building.

Otherwise, "demountable," modular architectural walls can be used to create smaller, defined spaces within a larger space. Products such as DIRTT Wall Systems (1) and V.I.A. by Steelcase (2) afford long-term flexibility, because they can easily be removed and redeployed in other areas as needed. Libraries may choose to re-divide an existing meeting room or, after weeding, shrinking, or eliminating certain collections, a library might choose to recapture and redefine some of that space.

Some libraries, such as the Mitchell Public Library (Mitchell, IN) are using retractable walls in a new way, in order to make meeting rooms space even more usable and flexible. In addition to the now typical retractable wall that can divide the meeting room into two, the outside wall of the meeting room is also retractable. This serves two purposes. Primarily it enables the library to truly open half or all of the meeting room to the rest of the library. This creates a significant amount of additional space for library users to sit and work when the meeting room isn't in use. It also enables the library to further expand the capacity of the meeting room on the occasions when a program exceeds the designed capacity—the wall is simply retracted, capturing some of the library space. All of the furniture in the library near the retractable wall is on casters, making reconfiguration for larger functions easy.

Mitchell Public Library: A retractable wall separates Mitchell Public Library's large meeting room from the rest of the library. An additional, retractable wall divides the meeting room into two smaller rooms.

Retractable walls are available in a variety of sizes and styles, including electric-powered and manually retracting. Of particular interest is the Skyfold (3) *vertically* retractable, acoustic wall.

This ceiling-mounted, retractable wall descends from above to provide privacy and quiet. They are easy to operate, provide a higher level of acoustic separation, and do not take up any floor space when retracted.

Libraries lacking the space or funds to create separate quiet areas using demountable or modular architectural walls might consider specialized furniture solutions instead. Products such as Hive by Nomad (4) use sound-deadening fabric panels to provide users with semi-private, relatively quiet workspaces. A very modular system, Hive enables libraries to create mini meeting spaces within larger rooms.

Other new furniture solutions to consider include the Brody WorkLounge by Steelcase (5), the Nook and Pods both by Agati (6), Think Pods by Fluid Concepts, and Walzer by ABF (7). As with Hive, these are modular systems designed to provide some degree of privacy and quiet.

Finally, designed in an era when libraries were expected to be pin-drop quiet, older library buildings, in particular, may have so *little* ambient noise that sound—and conversations—really carry. Still, even these can be retrofitted with sound-masking systems such as LogiSon Acoustic Network (8) which works by raising the overall level of ambient "pink noise," so that individual sounds and conversations are more difficult to isolate. Installing sound-absorbing panels and applying acoustic plaster to library walls can also help.

ISSUE 2: ACCESS TO ELECTRICITY

Another common user complaint noted on surveys and in focus groups is limited access to electrical outlets—especially in the middle of library rooms. Library users expressed a strong desire to be able to plug in and operate laptops or charge cell phones, tablets, and other devices in convenient, central locations.

Some new products on the market have made extending electrical access possible without expensive drilling or trenching. For example, the RE-LOAD table by Nomad (9) enables device-charging capabilities via multiple USB cords. The portable table is on casters and includes an electric battery which, after being plugged into a power supply overnight, can hold a charge for two to three days. Once charged, the RE-LOAD table can be repositioned anywhere as needed.

And libraries with carpet tiles (which can be pulled up in sections) can be retrofitted to run alternating current power under an carpet tiles with either Thread Portable Power Distribution by Steelcase (10) or Connectrac's In-Carpet Wireway (11). Simpler solutions like Ilse Power Tower from KI (12) integrate extension cords, power strips, and USB charge ports into a one-product solution.

A technology that is still catching on but looks to be the default approach in the future is wireless charging. A variety of companies have solutions in this area, one ChargeSpot (13) can not only be added to new furniture but can also often be retrofitted to many existing wooden tables and desks. For devices that do not yet support wireless charging, charging antennas can be plugged into the charging port, these could be circulated as you would charging cables or other technologies.

ISSUE 3: MAKERSPACES AND THEIR ALTERNATIVES

Collected user and non-user feedback suggests traditional Makerspaces are still neither well understood nor universally desired. Because interest in these facilities has been "hit-or-miss" and very community-specific, it is imperative that libraries seek public input before committing resources to build robust, dedicated Makerspaces. (As another way to gauge local interest, libraries might consider transforming meeting rooms or other collaborative spaces into non-dedicated Makerspaces during certain times and days of the week.)

Alternatively, survey respondents and focus group attendees of all ages and backgrounds did express interest in digital creativity spaces/labs like the "Level Up" space in the Monroe County Public Library (Bloomington, IN) which provides access to high-end, digital design and editing software, as well as full video and audio production suites. Overall, such digital creativity centers may be less expensive to create and have higher community utility.
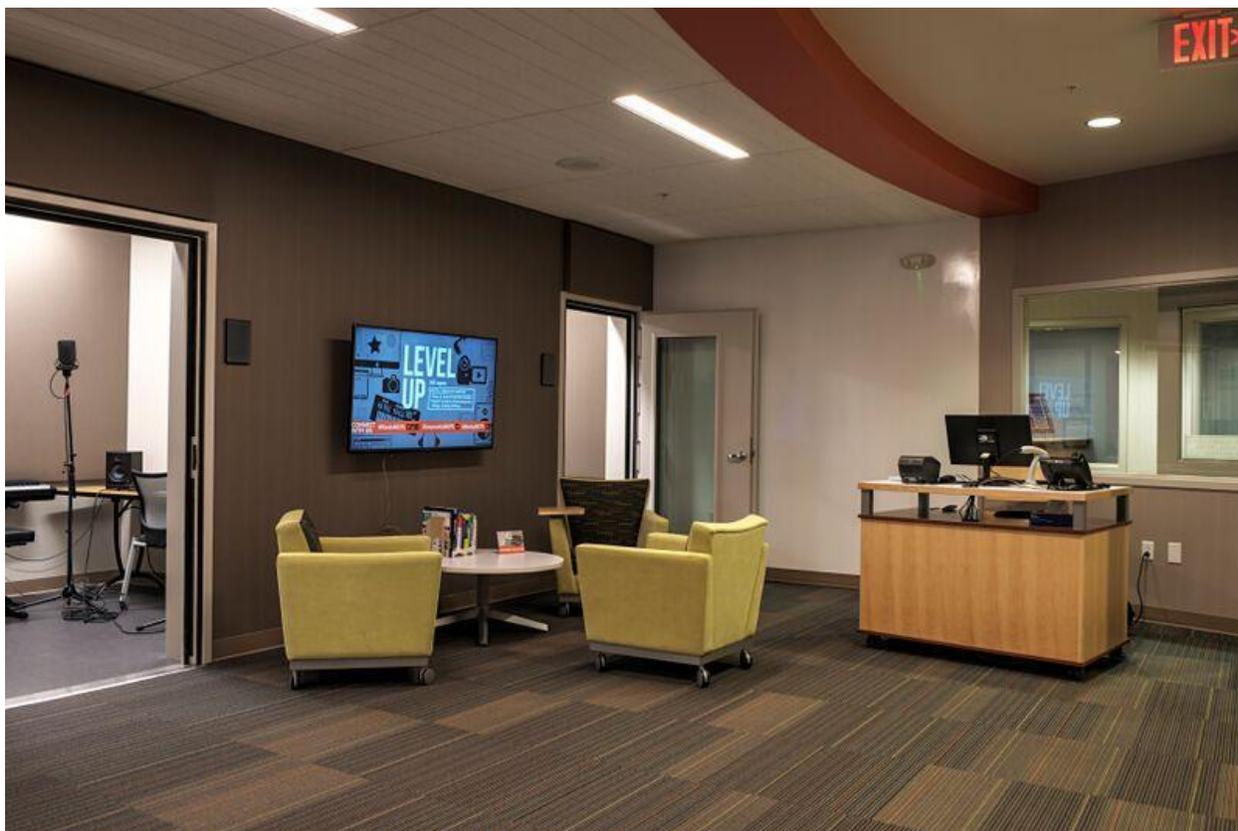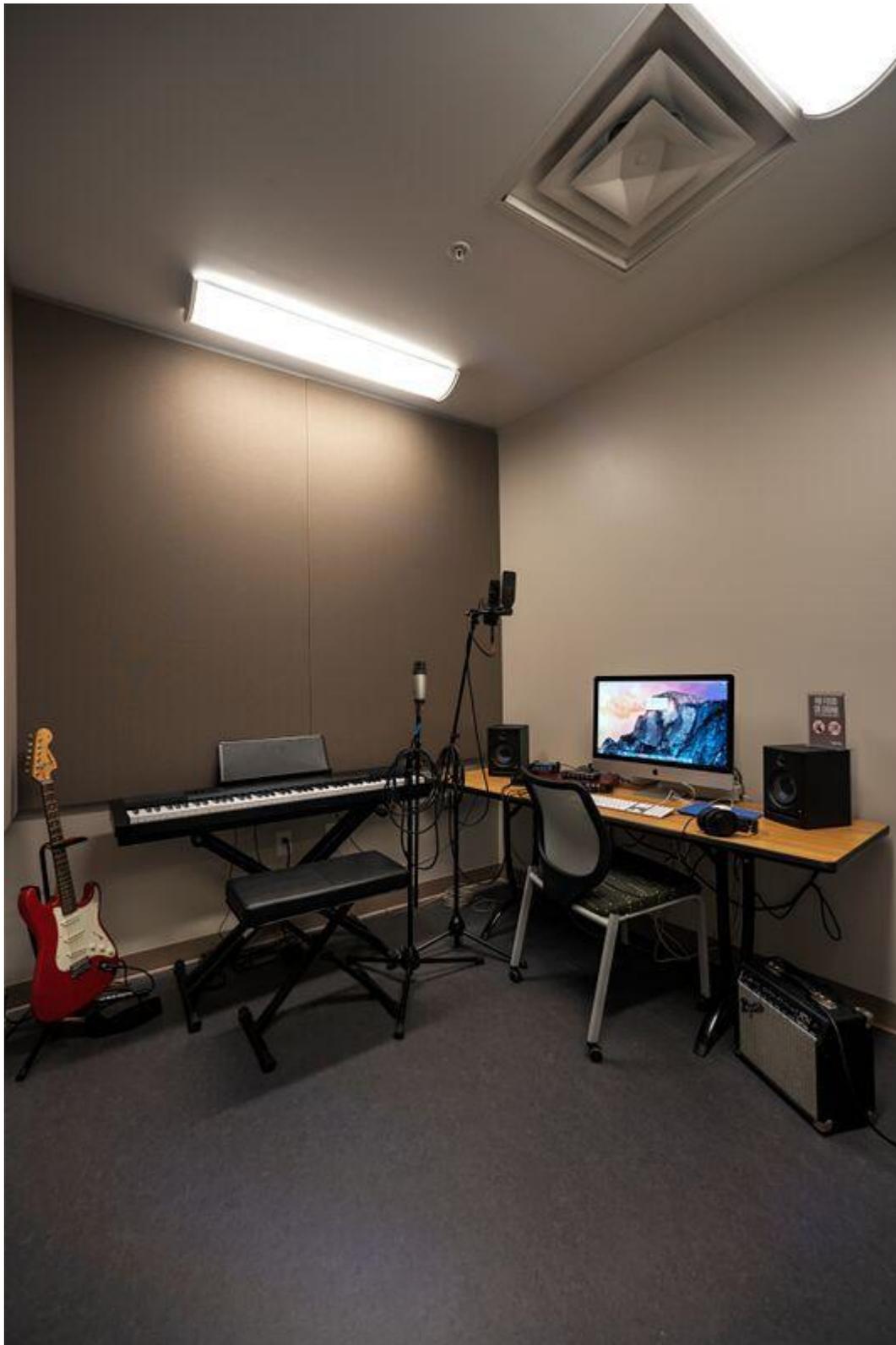
Level Up: The Monroe County Public Library (Bloomington, IN) "Level Up" digital creativity space includes digital design and editing software and full video and audio production suites.

Libraries not in a position to add either digital creativity stations or dedicated Makerspaces do have other, less expensive options, including creating circulating, library-curated "activity kits." While children's activity kits have long been a staple for some libraries, offering activity kits designed for adults is a relatively new trend. Some examples of adult activity kits include themed content, individual Maker technology or craft projects, "vitality kits" for seniors with specific health concerns, etc. Users may choose to use the kits at home or inside the library.

Case in point, Bloomfield Township Public Library (Bloomfield Hills, MI) offers scores of circulating activity kits, which have become very popular with users. While the library's original activity kits were aimed at helping children with a variety of special learning needs work on developing and strengthening specific difficult-to-master skills, the library now has six full rows of various activity kits with more general appeal for parents looking to work with any child on a variety of learning activities.

Bloomfield Township Public Library (Bloomfield Hills, MI) offers scores of circulating activity kits which have become very popular with users.

ISSUE 4: 'PERSONALIZED' MARKETING v. PRIVACY

To date, one of the most controversial issues coming out of the focus groups analyzed for this general review is the public's demand for more streamlined, "personalized" marketing efforts from their libraries. For example, library users without children—or those users whose children have long since left home—no longer wish to spend valuable time wading through library communications about children's programming. Rather, some users indicated, they would prefer that library marketers examine their individual circulation and program attendance histories and target future messaging to them accordingly.

In part, this development may be a direct result of the public's increased willingness to trade privacy for convenience. Google, Facebook, and similar websites have trained users to expect tailored ad campaigns and content to be delivered directly to them, and the need to sort through information that is not relevant or of interest to them may be seen as an affront.

This sentiment was also clearly expressed in a 2015 Pew Research Center survey of a sample of 461 adults in the U.S (14): "I want control over what ads are being 'pushed back' to me: I have no interest in 'puppy portraits' but I may be interested in cameras, equipment, etc. In an effort to 'target' my preferences, my inbox gets full of [expletive] that is not relevant to me" (Rainie and Duggan, 2016).

Another respondent added, "If most of the platform would be items of high interest to me, I would be willing to 'give up' a little of myself to enjoy the parts I am interested in" (Rainie and Duggan, 2016).

But targeting marketing messages based on a user's specific interests may be easier said than done. Consider: "Ninety-four percent of organizations believe personalized experience will be critical for future marketing success. Seventy-two percent of marketers don't know how to use personalization in their marketing campaigns" (Surapaneni, 2015).

However, tools and processes aren't the only challenge for libraries, given the library community's longstanding respect for user privacy. Targeting marketing messages based on a library user's specific interests is an understandably fraught concept for library marketers. Being more proactive with digital marketing opt-ins at the time of library card registration or renewal may be one initial step that doesn't conflict with the library's desire to protect user privacy; during these events, users could be offered access to multiple, tailored library newsletters, depending on their interests. That said, it is the authors' position that libraries need to be aware of the public's desire for more tailored content and decide as individual institutions—using broad input from their local communities—how to most comfortably navigate this trend and meet users' desires and keep the library's offerings relevant to users (and non-users).

OTHER BEST PRACTICES

Three other trends uncovered during focus groups include the public's desire for self-service holds, more outdoor workspaces, and a very strong preference for flip-through shelving for picture and board books, and a slight preference for flip through shelving for adult books in the cooking, gardening, and craft collections.

For many users—especially high-frequency, "get-in-and-get-out" library users—the concept of self-service holds goes hand in hand with library self-check stations. Fortunately, it is possible to offer self-service holds without sacrificing user privacy.

Best practices around self-service holds include housing them close to library self-check stations and allowing library users to create their own self-service hold usernames or marking self-service holds with a special code, such as the first two letters of the user's last name and the last three digits of their library bar code number. Additionally, self-service holds should be shelved with the spines down (to obscure the books' titles), and individual hold slips can be prominently displayed between or wrapped around a book's pages. These measures both protect user privacy and reduce the likelihood of other users "poaching" titles not intended for them.

Tiverton Public Library (Tiverton, RI) extends its reach with outdoor user seating.

Users also demonstrated interest in outdoor workspaces complete with access to Wi-Fi and electrical outlets. Trenching in outdoor applications, in order to extend power, is relatively easy and inexpensive, and the addition of cafe tables and chairs or outdoor-rated architectural furniture such as Parterre by SIXINCH (15) or Grove by SIXINCH (16). Depending on how users reach these outdoor workspaces—they may be just outside the library or first accessed from inside the library—these improvements could potentially afford 24-hour access to some library services.

When shown examples of children's libraries and collections utilizing various types of flip-through shelving for the picture and board books, nearly all users and non-users expressed a strong preference for this approach. Many of the authors' clients have seen circulation increases of 20 to 40 percent in collections moved into flip-through shelving. The trend has even crossed into adult collections with some libraries experimenting with moving categories like gardening, cookbooks, and crafts into flip-through shelves. Early results from those experiments have been positive, and focus group feedback to the idea has also been positive.

Ideally, flip-through shelving for materials for the very young should be no higher than 42" inches or as low possible such that children can easily flip through the books on their own.
Older youth, teen and adult shelves should be no taller than 66 inches—or 60 inches if the shelving is mounted on casters. Most metal shelving vendors offer options for flip-through (or bin) shelving, and many offer shelving options that can be retrofitted into existing metal shelving units.

LOCALIZED INSIGHTS

It is important to reiterate that not every public insight shared in this general review may be applicable to every library. As such, when it comes to making thoughtful strategic planning decisions, the value of *localized* public input for individual libraries cannot be overstated. Top among its "15 Steps for Library Leaders," the Aspen Institute Dialogue on Public Libraries lists, "Define the scope of the library's programs, services and offerings around community priorities, recognizing that this process may lead to choices and trade-offs" (2014).

Conducting local focus groups can be a highly effective way to identify and prioritize community needs, and, because public input sessions can be carried out successfully with or without outside consultant firms, library funding shortfalls need not—and should not—stand in the way of this critical strategic planning step. This is not to suggest that library leaders should conduct their own local focus groups. For best results, an objective third party should guide all public input sessions, and library staffers and leadership should be absent from the proceedings. This helps to ensure that members of the public will feel comfortable speaking freely about all aspects of their library experiences, thereby yielding insights, which are most accurate and actionable.

As an alternative to the use of library consultant firms as objective third parties, library leaders can seek out and partner with peers from other regional libraries to facilitate focus groups for one another. In this way, important insights can be gathered, and members of the public, likely unfamiliar with staff from one of their library's more distant counterparts, will be more apt to offer honest feedback.

Incorporating widely available benchmarking data is also critically important—especially during and after employing any new strategic plan. The authors encourage pulling state-reported statistics from a variety of libraries for self-comparison. Ideally, these should include nearby libraries, libraries with similarly sized service populations from elsewhere in the U.S., and nationally leading libraries. It is also highly recommended to look at a variety of per rata data types (e.g. per capita, per card holder, per visit, per circ, and per dollar spent), because often different rate data will provide additional context for comparison. As an example, a small library might have a small service population, but, as part of larger consortium, it might actually serve a much larger population of users and, thus, have higher per capita statistics than a similar community size that isn't part of such a consortium.

Stats	Apple Public Library	Average of Comparison Set	KH County Public Library	Center Twp Public Library	Elk Public Library	Ham Public Library	Mortensen Public Library	Brilliant Public Library
Op. Expenditures $	$ 7.8	$ 12.9	$ 9.3	$ 10.3	$ 17.4	$ 13.9	$ 16.2	$ 10.0
Material $	$ 1.4	$ 1.3	$ 1.4	$ 1.0	$ 1.7	$ 1.1	$ 1.3	$ 1.5
Total Wages	$ 4.0	$ 6.5	$ 4.6	$ 4.8	$ 10.1	$ 7.5	$ 7.1	$ 4.6
Benefits and Mandated	$ 0.8	$ 2.2	$ 1.5	$ 1.2	$ 3.0	$ 2.9	$ 3.4	$ 1.4
Total FTE (per 10,000)	1.0	1.8	1.4	1.6	2.5	1.9	2.1	1.1
Librarian FTE (per 10,000)	0.4	0.5	0.4	0.5	0.6	0.6	0.7	0.4
Other FTE (per 10,000)	0.6	1.2	1.0	1.1	1.9	1.3	1.3	0.8
Holdings	0.70	0.82	0.69	0.73	1.32	1.14	0.45	0.62
Circulation	2.1	2.09	1.8	2.2	2.0	1.0	1.8	3.7
Programs (per 1000)	2.1	3.3	1.3	4.3	3.3	3.3	4.1	3.5
Program Attend (per 100)	4.21	8.07	2.76	8.81	9.13	6.75	9.41	11.56
Computer User (per 100)	18.02	13.89	8.49	9.43	13.12	26.67	14.42	11.22
WiFI Use (per 100)	3.31	5.65		3.99	3.85	4.48		10.26
Library SqFt	0.28	0.21	0.09	0.13	0.29	0.37	0.18	0.20

Comparison Set spans KH County Public Library through Brilliant Public Library.

Self-comparison using metrics from libraries across the country is another best practice, particularly when coupled with direct community input.

Although data collected vary slightly from state to state, there are enough constants—like circulation numbers and program attendance per capita—to begin to get a clearer picture of a library's overall success, as well as the impact resulting from any recent changes in library policies, services, or facilities. Library leaders will also get a better sense of their performance relative to their peers across the country.

CONCLUSION

There has never been a better or more critical time for libraries to seek out, collect, and act upon candid feedback from library users and non-users. Doing so can empower libraries to better understand—and positively change—the way the public views them.

Furthermore, reconfiguring existing spaces in novel ways, employing new technologies in response to direct community input, and implementing some of the other best practices discussed here can be remarkably affordable and effective not just for retaining current library users but also for attracting new users and converting former non-users, too.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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ENDNOTES

1. Visit https://www.dirtt.net/resources/photogallery/popular/Library for a photo gallery of academic and public libraries employing DIRTT modular walls.
2. See http://www.steelcase.com/products/walls-work-walls/via/ for more information about V.I.A. by Steelcase.
3. For Skyfold product details, see http://skyfold.com/skyfold_classic_introduction_en.php.
4. See http://www.nomadflexiblefurniture.com/hive_web/index.html for more information about Hive workspaces.
5. For a photo gallery of the Brody WorkLounge, see http://www.steelcase.com/resources/furniture-images/?search=Brody.
6. See http://www.agati.com/pod-workstation/ for details about Agati's pod workstations.
7. Visit http://abf-works.com/products/waltzer/ for more information on ABF's Walzer seating.
8. See http://www.logison.com/applications/libraries.html for LogiSon Acoustic Network's library applications.
9. For a brief video about the RE-LOAD table by Nomad, see http://www.nomadflexiblefurniture.com/reload_movie.html.
10. See http://www.steelcase.com/resources/furniture-images/?search=Thread for images of Thread Portable Power Distribution by Steelcase.
11. Visit https://connectrac.com/products/in-carpet-wireway/ for more information on Connectrac In-Carpet Wireway.
12. See http://www.ki.com/products/name/isle-power-tower/ for the KI Isle Power Tower solution.
13. Visit http://www.chargespot.com/ for more information on the ChargeSpot product
14. The Pew Research Center survey was conducted between Jan. 27 and Feb. 16, 2015, among a sample of 461 U.S. adults ages 18 or older.
15. Visit http://sixinch.us/collection/88 for an image gallery of Parterre architectural seating by SIXINCH.
16. For an image gallery of Grove by SIXINCH table-and-chair designs, see http://www.grovebysixinch.us/image-library/c2uctll4fn16fuybmj2k09ttub8j8m.