OCF

OREGON PUBLIC LIBRARY NEEDS ASSESSMENT
Summary

Summer 2015

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> "Libraries are not in the library business, they're in the community business. Libraries are all about ensuring that their communities are healthy and successful."
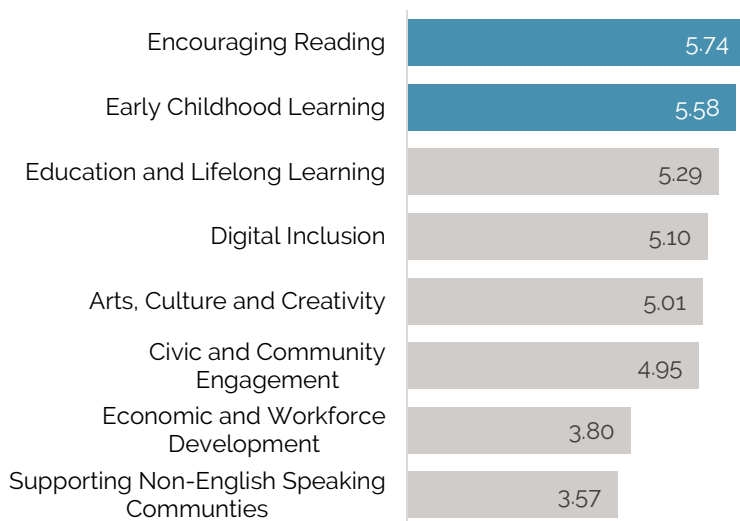>
> *- Oregon Library Director*

INTRODUCTION

In an effort to learn how to best support Oregon's public libraries as they address the challenges of serving a diverse public, the Oregon Community Foundation (OCF) commissioned a needs assessment on behalf of the Lora L. & Martin N. Kelley Family Foundation Trust and the Betsy Priddy Fund of The Oregon Community Foundation.

The 224 outlets of Oregon's 131 public libraries range in size from the Agness Community Library in Curry County, which serves 140 people, to the 19-branch Multnomah County library system, which serves over 770,000 people. Although cooperative agreements between Oregon's public libraries significantly enhance statewide access to collections, over 164,000 Oregonians (4% of the state's population, slightly higher than the national average) are considered unserved, with no access to free public library service. Most of the unserved are in Linn, Lane, Clatsop, and Columbia counties in the western part of the state, with small pockets located elsewhere.

LIBRARY ROLES

Public library directors list Encouraging Reading and Early Childhood Learning as top priorities for their libraries.
Average value on a 1 (strongly disagree that this is a priority) to 7 (strongly agree that this is a priority) scale

Role	Value
Encouraging Reading	5.74
Early Childhood Learning	5.58
Education and Lifelong Learning	5.29
Digital Inclusion	5.10
Arts, Culture and Creativity	5.01
Civic and Community Engagement	4.95
Economic and Workforce Development	3.80
Supporting Non-English Speaking Communties	3.57

Based in part on categories currently utilized by the Public Library Association (a division of the American Library Association) to develop standard outcome measures for the public libraries, the study utilizes eight roles to explore the diverse ways public libraries are engaged in supporting their communities.

- Arts, Culture and Creativity
- Civic and Community Engagement
- Digital Inclusion
- Early Childhood Learning
- Economic and Workforce Development
- Education and Lifelong Learning
- Encouraging Reading
- Supporting Limited English-Speaking Communities

The survey that produced the results above also asked how successful libraries are in fulfilling each role. The responses mirrored library directors' prioritization of the roles.

ENCOURAGING READING

Encouraging Reading received the highest rankings in the online survey with respect to being a priority as well as an area of success for individual libraries. According to the survey, public library directors in Oregon also believe that of the eight roles tested, Encouraging Reading is one that is least fulfilled by other community service providers.

Today, public libraries are augmenting traditional reading promotion activities such as children's summer reading programs, booklists and reader's advisory (helping patrons find the right book) with book discussion groups for all ages, author visits and support for private book groups (such as the ability to check out complete sets of book selections.) As was frequently mentioned in the focus groups, most public libraries actively support Oregon Battle for the 17 Books, a statewide competition that engages students in 3rd – 12th grade in an annual competition designed to enhance reading motivation and comprehension, and to promote cooperative learning and teamwork.

Oregon libraries continually seek inventive ways to encourage the love of reading for all ages. A recent example of this work is the "Million Page Challenge," in which three library teams competed to see whose adult patrons could read the most pages from library books in a six week period. With 1.1 million pages logged in, Team Harney and Lake Counties won bragging rights; among their "secret weapons" are 45 young men incarcerated at the Eastern Oregon Youth Correctional Facility in Burns, who are among the project's most enthusiastic participants.

FUNDING NEED:
Support reading promotion by helping libraries engage readers of all ages.

EARLY CHILDHOOD LEARNING

In their efforts to enhance children's early learning, public libraries approach services to young children holistically and comprehensively, engaging not only the child but also the people and systems invested in the child's well-being. Library storytimes form the bedrock of this approach, and many Oregon libraries also conduct outreach to preschool and childcare providers and provide early literacy training. Oregon library staff members are also involved in the state's sixteen early learning hubs, although the degree of this involvement varies considerably from library to library.

While early childhood outreach is most frequently offered by large to mid-size libraries, efforts have been made to extend it to Oregonians served by smaller libraries. In 2012, with support from the Paul G. Allen Foundation and the Oregon Community Foundation, the Reading for Healthy Families program engaged libraries in all areas of the state in early childhood learning. That there is a need for such opportunities among smaller libraries is reflected in the survey results, which show that libraries serving less than 1,000 people and with budgets of less than $50,000 were the only segments that did not rank Early Childhood Learning highly either as a priority or as an area of success.

The primary limitation that public libraries experience in enhancing the early childhood system is the lack of staff capacity to fulfill this function. All early childhood providers (both library and non-library) are challenged by the lack of staff capacity to collaborate, as well as differing schedules and difficulties understanding services offered by other providers. From the perspective of other early childhood providers, limited library hours and daytime programming reduce the ability of some public libraries to provide accessible services. Libraries in small or rural communities face additional financial, geographic and logistical challenges.

"If there is early learning happening somewhere, the library is behind it."

-*National Library Leader*

FUNDING NEED:

Help libraries expand outreach programs for early childhood services.

EDUCATION & LIFELONG LEARNING

The breadth of services that public libraries provide to support education and lifelong learning is quite broad, ranging from homework help to adult literacy classes to "how-to" programs. Due to recent education cuts, public libraries are increasingly filling the role of school libraries. Larger library systems such as Multnomah County Library have established outreach programs that provide books for classrooms, curriculum support, and other resources. Smaller libraries reach out to their local schools by providing tours, training in information literacy and programming.

"Libraries are part of the greater educational ecosystem and we're often not recognized as such."

-National Library Leader

DIGITAL INCLUSION

While public libraries initially addressed the need for digital access by adding desktop Internet computers, access to broadband via Wi-Fi is what people increasingly need from their public library. In addition, they often also need help developing the digital skills that allow them to navigate the World Wide Web, successfully utilize their smart phones and tablets, and develop digital content.

In 2011, with the support of the Gates Foundation, the Urban Libraries Council formed the Edge Coalition to create a technology management resource for public libraries. Launched in 2014, the Edge Toolkit is now used by public libraries across the country to align their public technology services with community priorities. In 2015, approximately 20% of the national public libraries have completed the assessment portion of the Edge Toolkit, including over 30 from Oregon. Later this year, the Oregon State Library will provide free access to this useful toolkit.

FUNDING NEED:
Address hardware and software needs to complement the Edge Initiative.

ARTS, CULTURE & CREATIVITY

As community centers with meeting rooms, exhibit areas and other amenities, public libraries have over a century's worth of experience presenting the literary, performing and visual arts. Today, public libraries are moving beyond traditional programs. For some libraries, that movement is resulting in the creation of makerspaces, hands-on, mentor-led learning environments that foster experimentation, invention, creation and exploration through design thinking and project-based learning. As of 2015, at least eight libraries around the state are planning makerspaces.

FUNDING NEED:
Support maker-spaces and other collaborative learning environments.

CIVIC & COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The ability of public libraries to be a safe and neutral convener of people from differing perspectives and all walks of life is one of their particular strengths. In many instances, "One city, one book" projects provide such an opportunity, as do Conversation Project programs from Oregon Humanities, town halls or candidate forums. Public libraries also play an important role in connecting people with government and human services.

At the national level, the primary public library initiative focused in the area of civic engagement is called Libraries Transforming Communities (LTC). LTC provides tools, resources and support for librarians to engage with their communities in new ways through practical steps: taking measures to better understand communities, changing processes and thinking to make the library's work more community-focused, responding proactively to community issues and putting the dreams and aspirations of the community first.

FUNDING NEED:
Fund training programs for LTC implementation.

ECONOMIC & WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

According to the survey and focus group results, many Oregon library directors believe that their community's needs in this arena are fulfilled by other agencies (such as local workforce development), which is reflected in its low ranking as a library priority or something the library is successful in providing. Despite the low rankings, libraries do offer resources to assist those in the workforce with a variety of needs. For example, through the Oregon Statewide Database Licensing program, all Oregon public libraries offer LearningExpress, an online resource that includes basic computer and Internet instruction, professional career certification tests, and tutorials to develop skills in math, reading and basic sciences.

SUPPORTING LIMITED ENGLISH-SPEAKING COMMUNITIES

In Oregon, language diversity varies significantly from community to community. Since library services are locally defined to reflect the unique needs of each community, this results in varying levels of responsiveness to this service role. The libraries that are most successful in this role recognize that this effort is more than a simple translation of what they offer English speakers. Instead, services must often be redesigned so that they are culturally relevant and compelling to their target audience. A recent LSTA-funded project by the Hood River County Library illustrates many best practices. Focused in Odell, OR, where Latinos comprise almost 64% of the local population, the project provides partial support for a library outreach position designed to engage Spanish speakers and increase literacy.

LIBRARY USAGE & FUNDING

Oregon's public libraries are heavily used, but rely greatly on local funding.

Oregon's public libraries enjoy the highest circulation per capita of all U.S. states—over 17 items per capita in FY12, more than twice the national average of 8 items per capita. However, they have a much greater dependence upon local funding (92% of total budget) than is the national average (84%) and also receive significantly less state support (0.8%) than is the national average (7%). There is great disparity across Oregon with respect to local tax support for public libraries, which leaves some Oregon libraries in a constant struggle for sustainability.

To fill ongoing financial gaps, Oregon's public libraries frequently turn to fundraising.

In the survey, 73% of Oregon's public library directors indicated that their library had applied for a competitive grant in the last three years, and 58% strongly agreed that they would pursue funding in the next year. In general, the larger the population served, the more likely this was the case. Yet, 100% of libraries with annual budgets over $10 million and under $50,000 also reported seeking grant support. With respect to geography, Southern and Eastern Oregon reported the highest incidences of grant seeking, and the Northern Willamette Valley (Marion, Polk and Yamhill) counties reported the lowest. Most frequently, libraries turn to local service organizations, Oregon foundations, the Oregon State Library/LSTA program or regional or national companies.

CHALLENGES

GEOGRAPHY

Libraries in more rural areas experience difficulties in attracting staff, program presenters and even audiences when attending an evening program means a long drive into town. The cost of gas and travel time makes it difficult for libraries to share materials, attend trainings and collaborate with other community organizations.

FACILITIES

Old and inadequate buildings, not designed for 21st century needs (particularly with respect to technology) create ongoing challenges. While numerous public libraries in Oregon have been renovated or replaced in the last two decades, many others with equal need remain outdated due to the lack of funding to make improvements.

FUNDING NEED:
Fund small scale ($5,000 to $10,000) facilities improvements.

MEETING ROOMS

Libraries that lack a meeting room find that it limits the programming and services they can offer, not only for library-sponsored programs but also for community sponsored opportunities. Others who have meeting rooms find that demand exceeds supply of available hours.

COLLECTIONS

While print is still in demand, there's a growing pressure to increase purchasing of e-books, which are often more expensive than their print counterparts. With flat collection budgets, libraries find it challenging to keep their collections relevant.

FUNDING NEED:
Expand e-resources and other collections.

TECHNOLOGY

Public libraries struggle to stay abreast of advancing technology. Many lack the funding to build ongoing replacement of staff and public computers into their operating budgets, let alone afford other needed technology such as self-check machines. In rural areas, it can be difficult to get high speed Internet access.

WORKING WITH SCHOOLS

The loss of credentialed school librarians (according to the Oregon State Library, an 84% decrease since 1981) has left a significant gap in services to school aged children. Without a school librarian to partner with, public librarians often find it difficult to forge connections with the public schools.

FUNDING NEED:
Support marketing to increase awareness and use of the library.

MARKETING

Libraries must work hard to change century old perceptions of what they have to offer, and to make their communities aware of relevant programs and services.

PHILANTHROPIC APPROACHES

The report identifies several areas of frequently expressed needs. In considering philanthropic approaches more broadly, there are several recent or existing models to consider:

- **Targeting support to encourage library innovation**: As one interviewee noted, private support is integral to public library innovation, as there can be challenges with using public dollars to experiment and explore new ways of providing services.

- **Targeting support to help the neediest public libraries**: Given the diverse sizes and service areas of Oregon's public libraries, it is recommended that this not be based on annual operating budget. Instead, eligibility for such a grant line could focus a variable that is better reflective of the library's overall well being, such as weekly open hours. Alternatively, the focus could be upon an area of specific donor interest, such as rural libraries, or libraries that serve a population under a certain ceiling.

- **Providing proportionate grant support to all Oregon libraries**: The model for this approach is the Ready to Read program, which divides funding provided by the Oregon Legislature among all of Oregon's public libraries. Distribution is based on a funding formula that includes the number of children and square mileage of each library jurisdiction. The minimum grant is $1,000.

- **Engaging Oregon libraries through a centrally managed statewide project**: Of the promising national practices covered in this report, one that might be appropriate for this kind of statewide project is the American Library Association's Libraries Transforming Communities initiative, discussed above under Civic and Community Engagement. Currently, ALA is working nationally with 10 public libraries from across the country to participate in an intensive 18-month team-based community engagement training program. Potentially, this community engagement training effort could be adapted for use in Oregon.

In May 2015, educator and Knight Foundation board chairman John Palfrey published *BiblioTech: Why Libraries Matter More Than Ever in the Age of Google*. Palfrey argues that, relative to other public costs such as education, public safety and health, "tiny public investments in libraries go a long way," advocating for both increased government support as well as a new generation of library philanthropists for the digital age. In Oregon, the philanthropic community has the opportunity to support a dynamic network of public libraries in the essential work that they do to support and enhance Oregon communities.

"The great news about libraries is that the lights are already on. You're not paying to set up an organization; that organization already exists. This gives a big bang for philanthropic dollars – libraries can move things forward."
-National Library Leader

METHODOLOGY NOTE

Penny Hummel Consulting employed several different methods to explore the research questions. The first, a literature review, explored existing information about what is currently being implemented successfully in Oregon as well as nationally-regarded best practices. Focus groups were conducted with 51 public library directors representing communities from OCF's eight geographic areas of the state and from 29 of Oregon's 36 counties, including three communities of less than 500 people. Interviews were conducted with 18 informants with particular expertise or perspectives germane to the research questions and/or a strong track record as successful library change agents or national leadership in the library community. This group included both library professionals as well as practitioners in the early childhood system. An online survey solicited input from Oregon's public library directors, who were also invited to share the survey with library board members, and Friends and Foundation trustees and staff.

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