



MIDWEST COLLABORATIVE *for* LIBRARY SERVICES

Building better libraries

Michigan Library Community Conversations 2016

In April and May, MCLS, along with volunteer facilitators and note takers from the Michigan library community, conducted eight Community Conversations across the lower half of the state. 110 library staff from across the region participated. In August, another five Community Conversations took place in the Upper Peninsula and across the northern tip of the lower peninsula. 51 library staff participated in that round. For all conversations, invitations were sent to the Michigan multi-type library community. There was representation from public libraries, academic libraries, school libraries, special libraries, and two vendors.

The conversations revolved around a Community Narrative, which was drafted after a series of Michigan library Community Conversations in 2014. The framework for these conversations is based on the work of the Harwood Institute for Public Innovation. The 2016 conversations were a “deeper dive” into themes which emerged from the 2014 series of conversations.

The five selected themes which resonated strongly with the library community were:

Concern over the evolving role of libraries, and how libraries need to know how to develop programming and projects to meet their communities needs to be relevant for today and the future.

That libraries have difficulty telling their story to their community and decision makers. This difficulty hinders the potential; positive impacts libraries can make upon their local communities.

What are the skills, attributes, and characteristics needed to be a successful library worker in the 21st century?

The need to mentor new library staff, and develop emerging leaders so the profession can flourish.

That through the devastating loss of over half of all Michigan School librarians in the past decade, and increasingly less every year, students are sorely lacking information literacy skills, critical thinking skills, and more.

In every conversation, the group felt that the current narrative from 2014 still resonated in the Michigan library community. It was noted/liked more than once that the narrative recognized all sizes and types of libraries.

The aspirational portion of the 2014 Community Narrative:

As a professional community, Michigan librarians and library staff of all types want to provide meaningful contributions to our local communities, be it town, campus, or school, in the revitalization of our state. We want our libraries to be dynamic and meet the communities' needs in real time. We want to be at the table when important decisions are made, and a sought after, fully-utilized partner, and resource in community projects; playing a pivotal role in all stages of a Michigan citizen's life. We want consistent and uninterrupted library service across the state, no matter the patron's hometown or affiliation.

We want our library community to be innovative, supportive of risk taking, and one which celebrates small successes, works collaboratively, and shares information. We want to work in an environment where all have easy and affordable access to the training, tools, and information required to stay current and meet our unique communities' needs.

We asked them if they wanted to add anything to those aspirations. Here is what they identified:

For the Library of Michigan, MCLS, and MLA to help us (the library community) learn how to better work with other organizations (local and statewide organizations).

For the Library of Michigan to work with the Michigan Department of Education to help make libraries and schools work more closely together.

Library friendly legislation. Specifically, there was concern about legislation which could be helpful and pushed by one type of library which may hurt another type.

Libraries “really listen to the local community”.

Libraries offer 21st century tools; “change starting from within the library”.

Libraries as a recognized bridge between formal and informal learning.

To build deeper partnerships, between libraries, agencies, and the community.

A genuine focus on building staff capacity.

Ensuring those outside the library community understood the importance and professional level of work done by the library community and administrators.

More face to face networking opportunities. It came up several times that the Michigan library community wants to interact more and learn from one another.

More open access to electronic resources across their patron groups. It was shared that some libraries have policies that are hard to enforce with multiple municipal boundaries.

Understanding for all levels of staff how local funding works for libraries, and how can funding be increased at the state level?

It came up many times that the community wants libraries to have a broader appeal to everyone and not be intimidating organizations. They also want them to be more comfortable and welcoming environments.

We talked about **positive signs that the Michigan library community were moving towards their aspirations**. Some mentioned the MAME 2015 Annual Meeting preconference supported by MCLS and other library service organizations as a very positive sign we were acting on the concern over the loss of school librarians. Many wanted more conversations around this issue.

Several participants told stories of special projects within their local communities where the libraries' project has expanded to encompass other entities, agencies, non-profits, and that they are now expected to be the table.

Some direct quotes:

- "I can be a creative as I want to be."
- "The quality of services is increasing."
- "Satisfaction is up."
- "There is a level of flexibility."
- "It is a rewarding profession."
- "There are a lot more professional development options."
- "Openness... there is more openness to everything."
- "Staff turnover is leading to culture change."

Main concerns - These crept into many of the conversations one way or another:

- Staff feel "ill equipped" to adequately provide all the social service work they are now required to do - Related there is some resentment and an attitude with some that "[t]his is not what I signed-up for"
- Fewer fulltime staff positions
- Figuring out what "we" don't have to do
- The struggle between quiet/traditional and new - There is a yet undefined balance. It's open ended and open ended is messy
- A need for a cultural shift and resistance to that shift
- Teachers are too busy to support/use public libraries; teachers support "online" resources
- School libraries/librarians don't have "control" over what they do; the principal ("layperson") does
- When asked, laypersons are "dismissive" about the library ("oh, it's just a library")

- A critical piece is missing for “successful transition to college and workplace” (Both inside the library profession and with library patrons)
- Students aren’t learning good evaluation skills; educators don’t see the importance; including “life readiness” skills
- “Risk taking is a big burden”; “how do we take risks when our resources are limited?”
- Keeping up with technology - This is related both to the library technology and providing technology to the community

Theme 1: We talked about how some are concerned about the evolving role of libraries, and that we need to know how to develop programming and projects to meet our communities needs to be relevant for today and the future.

Some stated they believe libraries are embracing new roles such as social worker, connector to support social networks, bike repair, new types of collections, meeting rooms, entrepreneurship support such as copyright assistance/patent trademark assistance, makerspaces, more ethnic related programming, citizenship, and notary services.

There was angst expressed in some conversations and a feeling of “still in flux” with the expanding and evolving role of libraries. Two camps were identified; one is closely guarding the traditional role, and the other is ready to try new methods. These camps were labeled embracers of change and traditionalists.

Some fear traditional roles will be lost and that there is unrest, and fear of a loss of relevance. Also, expressed by some was a fear of loss of “higher purpose” of libraries. Different groups see programming as educational and some dismiss it as entertainment. It was asked “How can libraries balance serving both traditional users and those that have new needs?” Holding on to outdated processes was identified as a key wedge in making progress.

People were concerned because they believe libraries are more scrutinized, and have more competition, than ever before. The competition was specifically the internet and associated technology.

A shared concern was that there is no large scale state-wide funding for libraries. That means each one is beholden to stakeholders so librarians DO have to be territorial because stakeholders don’t want to pay for someone else’s library service. Resonance: “It’s nice to think/say we’d all be working together but the practical/pragmatic landscape is we work for people who don’t want to support other communities. Therefore, the onus is on the stakeholders.”

We discussed how do people talk about the library in their local community? There was nearly complete agreement among public and academic libraries that the way people discuss the library in their community is either getting more positive, or has remained constant. Schools Media Specialists did not report the same. One stated a comment they heard “Are you going to be obsolete?”

A common concern noted by some Public libraries was that they're not seen as a good resource... just a means to point to a resource.

Here are the words people used to describe the library in their community:

A place to meet	Nostalgia
A play area for adults too	Omg I love the library
Are you going to be obsolete?	Omg my books are overdue
Aren't books dead?	Place for productivity
Early Lit.	Positive feelings
Entertainment	Preserver of history
Entrepreneur support	Public loves us
Food in summer	Readiness
Friendly	Referral
Gathering place	Safe meeting space
I love <name of staff person>	Safety net
Keeping community in touch with one another	Supports job skills and health
Last resort	Supports literacy
Link to community	Surprised by what we can do
Love the library	Third space
Maker	Traditional
	Tutoring

We discussed further **libraries taking on new roles**. The “library of things”, seed banks, and other collection based suggestions were made. The library as a social service agency was widely discussed. The library providing one on one instruction on a variety of topics, library as facilitator, and as a space for other agencies and service organizations to meet and become better were also suggested.

Some academics were concerned over the use of their space by non-library entities on campus. The issue specifically is that other areas, departments of the university are claiming space within their building and there was some tension around that. Some academic libraries have lost their physical library altogether and have been moved to office space. They have had to redefine what they do, and how they serve their community.

Theme 2: We talked about how it is hard to tell our story to our community and decision makers. Here is what was discussed:

“We don’t own our story” and “[w]e aren’t trained in marketing” were direct quotes from multiple conversations. Some said it was hard to get their communities attention because “[t]hey don’t want it till they need it.” Burnout contributes to this lack of attention. “Everyone feels they are alone” and overworked, so they just can’t pay attention to anything that is not imperative. On the counter side of that, the burnout and lack of reflective time hinders libraries for doing “one more thing”.

There was conversation around a lack of a coherent view of what libraries do, and that this phenomenon may be outgrowth of the diversity of our local communities and their respective libraries.

There was some pushback/confusion on the language used “telling our story”. The issue here appeared to be traditional advertising of products and services, rather than explaining the libraries role in the community.

It was noted that there is an “impetus” to always protect our patrons from the negative, such as budget cuts. Through this protection, patrons do not necessarily know libraries are doing more with less. “We’ve worked hard to make things invisible.”

There was discussion around the Learn, Say, Do matrix, and that libraries are very good at learning and doing, but often not good at saying, or telling their story.

We talked about what **libraries should we be doing** and some discussed a tension between staff stretched with community initiatives and still providing building-based services. Not enough time was a recurring theme. Having too much else to do, that’s more necessary in keeping the library running smoothly, seamlessly, instead of paying attention to new initiatives was mentioned several times. Why is that important? Because the public/stakeholders want a seamless operation.

There was discussion of **how to measure all the new services and initiatives**. Project Outcome was mentioned, along with several academic tools. It was noted “[a]ssessment is one of the biggest challenges to our profession right now”, and many were unsure of how to find the right mix – amount of assessment, tools to use. It was stated that “the good that we do” should be measured. The other participants in that conversation agreed. When asked by the facilitator to explain what that is, the group was unable to.

At many of the conversations it was brought up that qualitative measures should be applied. It was also noted in those conversations that it is harder, and a very real change for most to measure that. “It is easy to count transactions, but how do you assess relationships?” Some suggested stories as an answer to both **telling our story** and providing some **measurement**. Sharing success stories of those whose lives have been positively impacted by

the library would be an effective tool to educate decision maker and the public on the good libraries do. By connecting these stories to goals and objectives libraries can qualitatively provide some measurement.

We made a **list of impacts** that libraries have on their community. At nearly every conversation the group struggled here. It appeared they were confusing things they do and offer to the community, with outcomes and impacts.

Impacts that were identified:

- Having a good library as a convener/space means the population can meet there, and therefore more engaged citizens
- A safe and neutral place for tutoring which increases student achievement
- A safe place for marginalized and at risk individuals
- Increases the literate population
- Literate population is healthier
- Literate population makes better financial decisions, increases economic development, and builds the tax base
- Literate population commits less crime and creates a more attractive community for people and businesses to move to
- Free tech/training is an equalizer; provides space for opportunities – jobs, etc. Economic development
- Childhood literacy – reading at grade level by grade 4 is correlated with better HS graduation rate
- Resilience – libraries support community members. That support leads to community resilience and stability
 - But how do we measure that?
- Libraries as partners in larger community initiatives
 - Cradle to career; financial literacy; health care initiative

Theme 3: We discussed and made a list of what makes a good library worker in the 21st century. At every conversation, the lists were almost completely soft skills. “Tech savvy” was the lone non-soft skill item which repeatedly appeared. After the list was compiled the group was asked to grade the library community in general on the generated list. C- was the most consistent grade, although the range was D+ to A-. Although the low grade many suggested that library staff are getting better.

Here are the words that were used:

Ability to grow	Innovator
Ability to manage stress and let things go	Intellectually curious
Ability to work with everyone	Interpersonal Skills
Actually, like people	Kind, friendly
Adaptable	Knowledgeable about community and its members
Agile	Knowledgeable about variety of topics
Analytical	Leader
Approachable	Lifelong learner
Aware of surroundings	Local knowledge – knowledge of the community
Balance policy and need	Looks for challenges
Coachable	Love your community
Collaborative	Makes community better
Collegial	Multi-tasker
Communication skills	Nimble
Community connector	Non-biased
Compassionate	Open-minded
Connector to social services	Optimistic
Continuous improvement	Outside the box thinker
Creative	Passionate
Critical Thinker	Patient
Curious	Persistence
Customer service oriented	Personable
Decisive	Proactive
Deep abiding love of all humanity	Problem solver
Delegation	Project management
Diversity in all ways	Quick learner
Emotional Intelligence	Receptive
Empathetic	Respectful of others
Energy	Risk taker
Engaged	Self-directed learning
Engaged in work	Sense of humor
Enthusiastic	Social awareness
Fearless	Team Player
Flexible	Tech savvy
Fun	Thrifty
Good fiduciary steward	Understand needs of patrons
Good listener	Well-read in the field
Has vision	

Theme 4: We discussed the need to mentor new librarians and develop emerging leaders.

Everyone agreed there is such a need. Several participants told stories of how mentoring has affected them. On different occasions participants talked about another person in the room as their mentor and there were teary eyes. Most often there was a sense of nostalgia in this conversation.

Some mentioned MLA's mentoring program as a good start. Several stated that they would like more informal opportunities to network, and were pleased with the Community Conversation not only for the content discussed, but as a chance to be collegial.

We discussed areas where **new librarians might need mentoring** and some said project management, delegation, networking, customer service, and other traditionally professional development type subjects. Some said storytelling, traditional story telling for children and grown-ups. "Sustaining/enrichment of own life and interactions with people" was also mentioned.

Some talked about learning more what NOT to do as a flipside to mentoring. Ninja mentoring, guiding someone without them understanding they are being mentored, was also talked about.

There was discussion around **what library leader looks like**. Some stated that a library leader needs to be patient, yet decisive, a good coach, and empowering. Other qualities ascribed were willing to admit mistakes, able to motivate staff, have a vision and articulate it, able to play politics, and know very well the institutional culture.

It was noted that leaders are everywhere in our organizations. It is not just those with formal authority who are leaders, and that we need to be cognizant to foster the growth of those who likely will not hold formal power. That will also make our libraries stronger.

Some questioned the value of what is being taught in MLIS programs. On several occasions the relevance of the curriculum versus what the jobs entails was discussed.

Theme 5: We discussed the concern that some have about the erosion of the information literacy skills and critical thinking skills of students in our state because of the reduction of librarians in our schools.

Every discussion agreed this was a deep concern. Distressing, embarrassing, and a "massive loss", were some of the words used to describe the situation. Some stated a pivotal issue here is that there no simple way to prove the individual School Media Specialists worth. There was consensus that "everyone has a stake in this".

No one had a clear path to an answer here. Many suggested some top down legislation mandating school librarians in every school would be an answer. Some mentioned an initiative from the Michigan Department of Education working with the Library of Michigan would provide some guidance and support. However, when asked about the feasibility of either of

these options actually manifesting few voiced this was a real possibility. There was frustration and anxiety associated with this theme in every conversation.

It was noted that there are public libraries in Michigan working with their school districts, some on contract to provide library services to students. This is an issue of contention. Whenever School Media Specialists were part of the conversations they voiced this was a challenge to their profession. It was questioned whether un-teacher certified public librarians could provide the same service as School Media Specialists. Related some public librarians voiced concern over “not wanting to step on toes”.

It was also noted that this is a cyclical problem. It is hard to hire school media specialists because few library schools are focusing on this specialization since there are few, and a diminishing number of jobs.

We discussed what supports might students need. It was stated that students will need critical thinking and research skills. As part of this discussion there was mention of “Digital Citizenship”, that students will need to learn about developing appropriate boundaries both personally, as in cyberbullying, and respecting intellectual property. Some mentioned “universal design for learning” and “literature for life” as supports student might need.

Below is a list of some of the other potential supports mentioned:

- Ability to navigate through information overload
- Support “Deep reading”
- Support “Recreational reading”
- Support “Making time to read for pleasure”
- Provide supportive environment
- A mini laboratory – loud, white boards, iPads, collaboration spaces
- Data addressing if existing footprint/school spaces meet today’s needs? Loud spaces, quiet spaces?
- Collaborations between libraries – have relationships to better serve students
- Website is a virtual branch of the library
- Teach basic skills at each opportunity [don’t do it for them]
- Send messages to school boards, legislators
- Fragmentation of community – librarians are too nice; “[w]e need to be more proactive and contact State Associations, legislative lobbyists.”

We discussed supports that public libraries and academics could give. Some suggestions were:

- Collection development to fill gaps that K12 could then borrow
- Educator cards with longer loan periods
- Online access to tools
- “Build a box” of materials to support teaching unit
- Teachers working with public libraries – meet students at the public library

- Supplies and access brought up several times
- Transparency at meetings, bring the community in
- It would be helpful if publics/academics did the cataloging - Don't just send the Public Services librarians to help - Also, send the Cataloging/tech services help.
- Everyone needs to be telling the story of the student's plight, not that of school librarians

It was noted that the Michigan Academic Library Association is now working on some level with MAME on advocacy and looking for other ways to assist with the situation.

We discussed potential drawbacks from public and academic libraries giving support and some mentioned resistance from school boards, structural impediments, and the need to plan more because of rules about minors on campus. It was also noted that school boards may take advantage and decide to provide even less financial support if resources come in from other avenues. Some publics were concerned about stressing their staff if they were to start working with the schools as well.

Some suggested that amassing the data/studies which indicate/prove having School Media Specialists in schools increases student achievement would be a good first step forward. The Library of Michigan, library schools, such as Wayne State and the University of Michigan, MCLS, and other library service agencies were offered as those who might lead on this initiative.

Others identified who should be involved in making this situation better were parents, teachers, Intermediate School Districts, the Michigan Department of Education, school boards, and the business community.

Another suggestion was shared library cards between schools, publics, and beyond. The concept of uninterrupted library service for everyone in the state popped up during the school library portion of the conversation in several locations.

Book drives for school libraries was suggested both as a way to procure supplies, and also as an opportunity to talk about the situation and get media attention. This would potentially alert others to the plight and perhaps it would open a doorway to get other partners, outside the library and education community, involved.

It was also noted that building personal relationships between librarians of all types would help on this and other issues.

Conditions:

As we thought about the various topics we discussed, **some things that would provide a sense that we are making progress or moving in the right direction** were identified.

Libraries being at the table when important decisions are made came up several times. Some mentioned seeing people step outside their comfort zone. It was stated that seeing library staff authentically interacting with their community as the norm, not the exception, would be a true indicator. Several mentioned that libraries need to do a better job with customer service. Some stated that seeing library staff as friendlier in general would be an indicator that we are making progress and moving forward. Having the Community Conversations themselves were mentioned as indicators that we are moving forward.

Some specific quotes on these new conditions:

“Learning how to tell our story with impacts, and in a way to do it the way stakeholders want to hear it. Also, staff may not realize that they’re impacting the community, so they should hear the stories too.”

“I need to see the changes in my own library to believe it is happening.”

“We want connections but there are barriers... we shouldn’t be as hesitant as we are to break down-through those barriers. Open lines of communication on big issues. We don’t need to have to wait for an event like this or come up with all the details.”

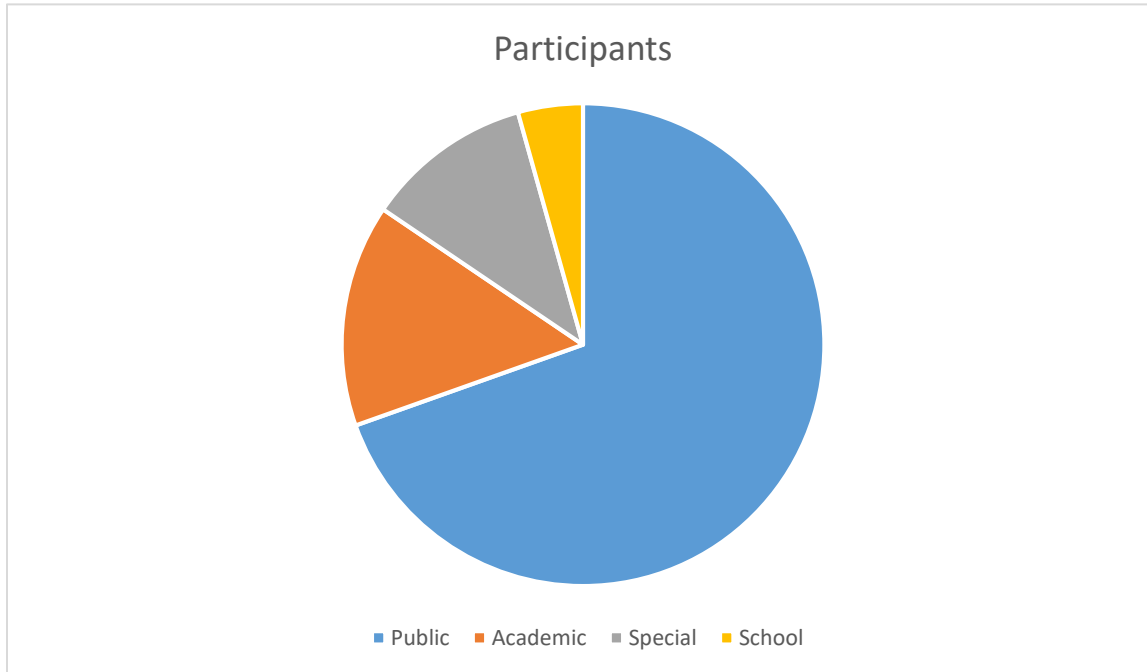
Participants by Library Type:

Public - 112

Academic - 24

Special - 18 (Including two vendors)

School - 7



Conversation Dates/Locations:

August 25 - Presque Isle District Library, Rogers City

August 24 - Fremont Area District Library, Fremont

August 23 – Traverse Area District Library, Traverse City

August 17 – Bayliss Public Library, Sault Sainte Marie

August 16 – Peter White Public Library, Marquette

May 12 – Ypsilanti District Library, Ypsilanti

April 22 – Capital Area District Libraries South Lansing, Lansing

April 21 - Ypsilanti District Library, Ypsilanti

April 20 – Paw Paw District Library, Paw Paw

April 19 – Southfield Public Library, Southfield

April 18 – Public Libraries of Saginaw, Saginaw

Conversation facilitators:

David Ewick, Southfield Public Library

David Votta, MCLS

Note takers:

Megan Bauerle, MCLS

Meghan Courtney, Wayne State University Walter P. Reuther Library

Rachel Minkin, Michigan State University Libraries

Donna Olson, Salem-South Lyon District Library

Debbie Schaubman, MCLS

Sonya Schryer Norris, Library of Michigan

David Votta, MCLS

Shannon White, Library of Michigan